

GOD WAS AFRICAN

Nkemngong Nkengasong

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God Was African

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For my Ancestors

One

Home.... I was home at last. These words came briefly to my mind as soon as I got off the bus and stepped on the earth of my ancestors. A broad earth road branched off and meandered above me, on a steep hill leading to Anya, a village at the center of Lewoh country where my father's compound was located. As I walked up the winding road from Betalanda where the bus had left me and continued its way to Menji, I had one dominant urge in me, to meet my ageing mother who had been ill while I was abroad. I went up the road as if a mystical force pulled me to the roots, to the foot of the bedpost in her house where I was told my umbilical cord was buried when I was born. That was almost four decades ago.

The road wasn't very dusty as it was sometimes the case at the beginning of the dry season. One could see traces of the last October rains; the deep gorges dug by running water and the residues of soft sand and decomposed vegetation deposited on some parts of the road. The atmosphere was cool and unruffled, except the slightly chilly breeze which caressed my being and I felt my senses brightening up, even with the beads of sweat that were beginning to settle on my forehead. The breeze carried with it a specter that reanimated self and soul, reawakening consciousness that had been possibly deadened by the many complex things I had been engaged in, going from place to place within the last one year.

Midway up the hill, I stopped to take some breath, and then I looked round the interminable chain of hills that hemmed Lewoh country. Lewoh country was a vast territory of eighteen villages. Each village was ruled by a chief and the eighteen chiefs were governed by a paramount ruler at the center of the country at Anya. One could see that each village

occupied one or two of the hills. The hills were separated by deep ghastly valleys which sank deeper and deeper while the hills flung here and there down towards the forest zone. I could see Lap Village to my right running about a thousand feet down the great canyon, into a vast open uneven plain towards Atoh Village. I could also see Beyano Village rising on a distant hill on the far side of a valley, seeming to touch the horizon. Up above me to my left was Menky Village located on a hill that rose and fell and rose again higher and higher towards other villages including Ndungalleh, Lefok, Nweh-Mbinzeah, Atulleh.... I often wondered what led my ancestors to settle on this possibly roughest part of the earth. It could have been the desire to conquer territory and lord over it; lord over the palm bushes, the animals, farmlands, the forests, the hills and the valleys; marry many wives, bear hundreds of children and reign over them. I had walked up and down the same hills since I was born. When I was a boy, tearing through the thickets and the forests, racing up and down the hills playing with friends and hunting rat moles and birds was great amusement. Now it seemed the mind ran faster than the legs. And having stayed for long without visiting the countryside, the hills could no longer recognize those limbs that now were weary moving from one corner of the earth to the other.

Much had changed in the appearance of the hills as I grew up seeing them. Farming and lumbering had gradually razed some of the hills and exposed giant bald rocks at their crests. The dwindling thick forests and groves and the emerging grasslands especially in the eastern part of the land were the only fauna left to bear the testimony of the ages. While some of the hills were fast losing their vegetation, a few distant ones towards the southern country bunged with baobabs, iroko, sapele, bebinga and palm trees soared into the sky. My father once told me that the forest on the distant hills was home to renowned wizards of the land and that only those who owned totems of different kinds like pythons, leopards and owls lived there. He said there was constant rivalry even amongst wizards

to dominate the sinister universe of the forest. He also told me about the twin hills he called Nyi-mbindia separated by a short distance which was the abode of spirits. The hill he called Nyimbong, the good hill, was said to have a lake and a spiritual palace with roads linking every part of it. Only fetish priests, potent medicine men and important chiefs and notables had access to it. My father said it hosted the good spirits which protected the land against the evil forces. It signaled the death of an important notable or a chief in the form of landslides and the trembling of the earth around the hill. Barren women went there to solicit children in prayer and song but they never went too close. The other hill was called Nyi-tebong, the evil hill which no one dared to approach or talk of. This was the abode of evil spirits and was most dreaded. At this instant thought, I felt a chill. Goose pimples invaded my whole body. The old fear, the fear I used to have as a child each time I looked towards those hills revisited me. But what I dreaded most, as was the case with other children, was the *amoh*, the massive dark spirit that was said to kill with a single strike. I remembered that going on an errand in the night was the most terrifying moment for me. I would imagine frightful dark monstrous shapes standing before me in the darkest part of the village waiting to crush me and I would muster up courage and with what speed I could never tell, run past them to our compound then enter my mother's house.

"Was any one chasing you?" my mother would ask.

"I met *amoh* on the road and it almost struck me dead," I would say, almost running out of breath.

"Is that why you have run until you are begging for breath? When will you become a man?" my mother would ask and I would swear that the spirit would have flattened me with its fist if I had not sped off.

All these childhood incidents came to my mind with my eyes roving on the hills and in vast valleys where one could locate scattered homesteads and compounds built with mud-brick houses and roofed with aluminum sheets within extensive

farmlands. Although most of the homesteads were linked with clear footpaths and distinct motorable routes, a stranger to the land would wonder what magic the inhabitants used to reach the hills and the indeterminable depths of the valleys.

The enchanting song of *ngu-seng*, the multi-colored bird, which was known in the village to sing after every hour, began to fill the atmosphere. I brought my left hand instinctively before me and looked at my watch. Six o'clock already! And the day was still very bright! I had to move a little faster and get to my father's compound before nightfall. I needed rest. I needed rest in the cool comfort of home and to relive its untarnished memories. It was lovely to see those peculiar features of the landscape again before it was dark, those features that witnessed and nurtured the evolution of my youth. I quickened my pace. My travel bag hung from my left shoulder. It thumped constantly on my thigh making some swishy noise as I made some desperate progress up the winding road. That was the fate of those who lived in this part of the world. They were either climbing or descending. At the summit of each hill one could see other hills tumbling into valleys further and further away. In spite of the chilly breeze, I could feel the damp clod of sweat on my inner wear. Bubbles of sweat also emerged on my forehead and I wiped them with the tail of my shirt, feeling much buoyant. At the top of the hill where another broad road ran down on the left to the district hospital, I walked leisurely on the rare even stretch of the road towards the village market square, stopping time and again to greet or answer greetings from the country folk.

Two

I arrived in the Anya before dusk. A number of shops and bars were open at the more populous part of the village market square. People who had returned from their farms were relaxing in the bars or just going around to greet friends and relatives or to pick up the latest gossips. I threw my eyes towards the open ground that stretched towards the entrance into Anya Palace, the seat of the paramount ruler of Lewoh country. In the old days the open ground served as a food market. The baobab tree still stood at the center, huge and tall with bold massive branches spread out as if to cast a spell on the entire universe. Its crusty aged bark and large arched roots on the earth's surface could trace its existence from the beginning of time. Certainly it had seen the beginning of time. And as we were told as we grew up, it was under the tree that Anyankendong first settled with his followers when he came into the country, outwitted the original settlers and started a dynasty whose lineage has existed till date. From their stumps, one could see that two or three dried-up branches had fallen off but the shoot never seemed to give up its determination to conquer the sky, competing only with the crows that perched on the tallest branches and took off at will.

Down the open ground the palace plaza was separated by a couple of huts at the entrance. One of those huts contained huge wooden drums which in the past were used to summon the country folk. To the right of the entrance was the *Lefem*, a sacred grove with an extensive thick, dark and serene forest bordering the right flank of the palace. On the rear of the plaza, the immediate visible signs of the palace were the pointed tops of the aluminum roofs of the *nkwohie* which served as the royal platform during festivals. Much of its view was covered by the trees in the *Lefem*. There were several

people moving in and out of the palace, some stood in small groups on the festival plaza, two or three elders hurried into the *Lefem* and disappeared in its thick undergrowth giving the impression that there was some emergency meeting in the palace. As I went towards my mother's palm wine bar I could see the trooper, the white four-wheel-drive minivan that belonged to the paramount ruler of Lewoh parked at the right flank of the plaza. The young prince, His Majesty Fuo Atemangwat was probably in the *mbelekong* attending to some urgent matters of the land.

My mother sat in front of her little palm wine bar located at a very populated part of the market square, possibly one of the few surviving palm wine bars in the land. The palm and raffia bushes had been destroyed and in their place coffee and cocoa had been planted. Palm and raffia wine had become as scarce as dog's tears. Many people now went for beer. When my mother saw me she exclaimed, staggered to her feet, spread out her arms and waited until I descended the little slope in front of her bar to meet her. She was worn with age. But the energy with which she stood to welcome me betrayed her old and wobbling self.

"Come well, child," she said hugging me.

"Mami, how are you doing?" I asked.

"You have met me again, child," She said.

"I heard you were ill." I said.

"I was ill, child. But I am better now. I am glad to hold you again in my arms before my death," she said, her arms still clung tenaciously round my shoulders and I could feel a little nervousness in her arms. "When did you return from Ameleka?" she asked.

"The day before yesterday, Mami," I said.

"You have done well child, to visit us again," she said, releasing her hold and ushering me to a seat on the other side of the door of the bar. I shook hands with the people inside the bar before sitting. It was a small palm wine bar with several

jugs of the white stuff, small plastic containers of *bitakola* and red colanuts displayed on one of the tables.

The people in the bar ate colanuts and drank the liquor. They stood and greeted me again and again before resuming their seats. My mother had her permanent seat on the right flank of the door into the bar from where she served her customers. She had started the little business when she could no longer go to the farm.

“Come well, child. Let me greet you again,” said my mother squeezing my palms lightly. “Did you see your brother?” I mumbled some words which I could not possibly understand myself. The question came too early and I was not in any good disposition to start narrating the story of my brother. I am sure my mother guessed as much and did not persist. “You should be tired after travelling this long distance. Your sister is preparing some food for you. Since you called yesterday to inform us that you were coming, she has been busy making arrangements for your stay. The village is not the same thing like the red man’s country where the machine does everything,” she said going to her seat. The men in the bar offered me colanuts and while I ate them they provided me with a wine glass.

“There is raffia and palm wine,” said one of the men.

“Raffia,” I said stretching my glass to have it filled. I gulped down the milk tapped from raffia stalk like one who had been thirsty for ages. They filled the glass a second time and it is when I started drinking gently that I savored the invigorating natural taste of the wine.

“Good raffia wine,” I said.

“Very good raffia wine,” said another. “The tapper’s hand has the mystic touch of his ancestors.”

“Indeed, he taps with magic hands. And it is as if you should never stop drinking,” said another.

“How was Ameleka?” asked one of the men.

“America rests well. It is a great place. The people and their country are so many centuries ahead of us,” I told him, hoping

he would give me time to freeze my mind. I was worn out walking for months on the trail of American civilization, of the greatest civilization on earth and needed some relief in the calm and serenity of the village. It was a long story....

My sister sent a child to collect my bag and also sent word that I should come home and eat. The man in the bar was going to ask more questions but more people came to greet me. They found their seats either on the veranda on a bench or in the bar. I ordered two jugs of wine and we drank together.

"Mbe Nwet, has the matter been settled?" asked one of the men in the bar.

"What matter?" asked another who had just arrived. "Do you see it as a matter that can be settled in a day? This matter has teeth. It will split Lewoh country if not handled in both hands. The chiefs are already divided," said the other.

"I know that the viper and the scorpion cannot settle an issue without exchanging jets of venom. I know this very well. But if a chief must be chief, he must follow the rules of our ancestors," said the man in the bar.

"No one walks on two paths at the same time. The *Lefem* is in session on the matter," said the other.

"But the church should know that it did not travel from wherever it came and found a vacuum in Lewoh country. It came and met people with their own customs and traditions. Ugh! How does one kill a snake that has coiled round his calabash of oil?" said the other.

"I blame the chief. He did not initiate his children well. The children are now insisting on a Christian burial for their father. But some of the fathers of the land do not think that this is the right thing to do to a departed chief who was one of the custodians of our culture and who knew that he was to travel to the land of his ancestors and then return as tradition demands," said another.

"Things have long changed. The church and tradition today are one. Do we not sing the same ritual songs in church today which the church forbade our fathers from singing in

their ancestral shrines a long time ago? Did they not say the songs were pagan songs and that it was the work of Satan singing those songs and dancing? The church refused eating the crab when it first arrived. Today it is eating its sauce and licking its fingers,” said another.

“How does it come that a chief should be put in the cold house when we knew when we were growing up that a chief never dies but goes on a journey to return in another form?” said another.

“A chief disappears and returns to rule. And this is done through a number of rituals,” said the other.

“Now that his children do not want tradition to interfere with the burial of their father, how will he return?” asked another.

“We shall see how the viper and the scorpion will resolve the matter,” said the other. The conversation was becoming more heated. Many people now came in and I was desirous to hear more. I had heard about the departure of Fuo Beyano on my way to the countryside but I didn’t know it was taking such conflicting dimensions. The issue was stirring more and more arguments and some people were clearly on the side of the church while others held firm that the laws and customs of the land must be respected.

“Dokta, tell us your own mind. Should the cocoyam be uprooted because someone has to plant flowers? Tell us. You book people see things differently,” said one of the men.

“Leave my poor child alone,” said my mother. “He has just arrived... he has not even reached his father’s compound and you people want to drag him into politics? Child, you should be going home to eat. I will be meeting you soon,” she said. The people in the bar continued their debate. I listened to them but I had no opinion on the matter. At the moment, my mind was still badgered with issues days after my return from the United States. I had lived and interacted with a number of peers representing a cross-section of the world’s peoples and civilizations and came to understand that the world after all,

may not really be the way we understand it to be. I was carrying a load on my mind, trying to understand the world the way it now seemed to be. I was tired, needed to take a bath, eat then go to sleep.

My little nephew led me to the compound. It was already dark outside except that there were a few electric bulbs in the different parts of the market whose light split the night although darkness still stood above the faint glare around which was a flurry of insects. Out of the market square it was completely dark and I managed with the light of my mobile phone to trace my way. My little nephew went ahead of me as if the road identified his feet or as if his eyes could penetrate the darkest part of the village. He walked so fast while I struggled to catch up with his pace. As we got nearer I could discern the house in the dark because a dull yellowish bulb from the veranda lit the immediate vicinity. This was the last house my father had built before he died. It was a semi-modern house he had estimated at his own level. It stood on a hill above the other houses in the compound. The parlor was not very spacious. Two large windows sealed with wooden shutters were fixed on the front and the rear wall. The floor was concreted, and a veranda led to the room and toilet section flanked on both sides by doors. In the dim lights of the lone parlor bulb one could not immediately see the nature of the concrete floor but I could judge that it was clean. A large table stood at a corner with a series of chairs. I went straight to my room, a moderate room with a medium size bed and a wardrobe that had never been completed. On the rear wall hung my father's photograph. It had been laminated on a board. The light was blurred and I could not see his face well. But the image had forever stuck to my mind, every detail of his face, the furrows, his long chin and sharp dark eyes accompanied me wherever I went. I had developed the picture the year he died and it had since remained my most immediate contact with him each time I went to the village. I took a bath,

changed my dressing and returned to the parlor where some relatives and friends were already gathered to greet me.

My mother met me in the compound soon after I had taken a bath and eaten my evening meal. My sister had prepared the food; a bowl of fufu made from pounded cocoyams and a bowl of vegetables. It was *nchie*, the sap of pumpkin leaves which my sister had prepared with a concoction of local spices. There was a third little bowl containing smoked porcupine which was also cooked in a special way. Even when she was still serving the food, the aroma stirred my senses and little streams of saliva filled my mouth. I sat at the table, before the food, like a marabou about to cast a spell, and ate like one who had been starving for ages. My sister served the guests the rest of the food after ensuring that I had enough for myself. When she finished serving them, I sent her to buy some crates of beer and some raffia wine. More guests came into the parlor. Three of my father's wives came in one after the other carrying dishes of assorted snacks and fruits including fried groundnuts, colanuts and oranges which they placed on the table, then they came and hugged me one after the other. I heard the familiar voice of Bombabili even before he came into the parlor. He was a man in his late thirties who was reputed in Lewoh country and beyond as one who spoke grammar more than the person who invented the English language. This earned him the name Bombabili. As an elementary school leaver he had loved education but he never had the opportunity of continuing school.

"Welcome Dokta," said Bombabili, staggering towards me and stretching his hand. Before his hand reached mine, the smell of alcohol quickly hit my nostrils.

"Thank you, Bomba," I said, shaking his hand. "How is your household?"

"My household is well. We lack nothing; we owe nobody nothing. Dokta, let me welcome you again to and fro," he said shaking my hand again with such vigor that could pull off my arm from its joint. "I see you when I was returning back from

the farm. Then I went to wash my body and change the old particles of rags”.

“Bomba, we have also come to greet our brother. Allow us to talk with him too,” said one of the guests.

“Is your brother? Do you know him? This is Dokta Kendem, a ganacologis of books. Can you speak English? Let me tell you, I am the only one in Lewoh who speak English with Dokta.”

“Bomba, your own English is in your wives’ kitchen when they are pounding fufu,” said a youthful voice.

“My friend”, said Bombabili, his voice rising to a high pitch as he waved his fore finger fervently in the direction of a dark corner where the youth sat. “You are an *embezzard*, a *scaliwag*, article of no commercial value, a nincompoop....” And as the words fell from his lips one after another, the guests greeted them with cheers.

“Bomba”, said my mother. “Let me greet my child again. I came in when he was eating. All this ngrammar is for what?” asked my mother.

The conversation dragged on until my head was beginning to droop. Some other guests came in talking excitedly about the stalemate in the burial of the departed chief. After a while, the first group of guests left. Bombabili left with the last group, still making a lot of noise. After ensuring that everyone had left my mother pulled her chair and sat near me.

“Child, did you see your brother in Ameleka?” She asked.

“My brother,” I said, then heaved a deep breath not knowing how I was going to start telling the story about my elder brother who had left the country many years before and had never returned.

“Did you see him, child?” my mother asked again folding her arms and stretching her head towards me.

“I saw him, Mami,” I said.

“Thank you, gods of our ancestors! Did you see him with your own eyes or someone else told you he had seen him?”

“I saw him during the last days of my stay in America, after looking for him for all my stay there.”

“Gods of the household of Tanju-Ngong, you have heard my cry. Did you see him well, child, with your own eyes? All I want to know is that he is alive and well,” said my mother.

“Mami, it is a long story,” I said. I didn’t know what other answer to give her at the moment. I was quiet for some time until she spoke again. “Child, is there anything you are hiding from me? Was your brother in good health when you met him?”

“If you see a pig digging the earth with its snout, won’t you think it is doing well, Mami?” I said.

“You are speaking Nweh that is above me. You need sleep. We will talk tomorrow,” my mother said and left for her house. She was not in a very bad shape as I had feared. She had quite recovered and was going about quietly with her daily chores. As I went to bed that night I knew that she was very worried about her son and that was worsened by the fact that I wasn’t giving her any information about him. What would be the reason telling her a story about her son that could aggravate her health situation? I found my brother after a long search in the United States. When I was leaving he told me not to bother to tell anyone about him. How was my mother going to take this? How was I going to start telling her the story? I had met him in the last days of my stay in the United States but I had not yet found a way I could tell my mother the story. Besides I was burdened with my own illusion about life and the world as I perceived in the last dozen months. I needed some calm and rest. I needed peace within myself. I needed to purge myself of certain conflicting thoughts and feelings by moving away from the center to the countryside. But my mother’s concern about my elder brother kept reminding me of the efforts I had made to meet him during my stay in the US. I could understand her worry, I could feel the pains in her mind as she brooded about her first son who had traveled out of the country a long time ago and had never returned.

Three

The sharp noise of an object stamping on the concrete floor of the veranda woke me from sleep. As I raised my head to listen, the noise became clearer and clearer until it became evident that someone was coming towards my room. Shortly after my mother called. I scrubbed my eyes until they became watery. It seemed there were a thousand little pebbles in them. I heard my mother's voice as if in a dream. I opened my eyes reluctantly until I was fully awake to grasp the calm and serene atmosphere of the village. The hum of voices, the tussle and bustle of activities, of struggle, of determination and anxiety that had filled my mind the whole night made my nerves tense. That early morning I felt more relaxed. And when I went out of the bed and flung the door open, I was swathed in a cool morning breeze. My mother stood before me observing me closely.

"Child", she said. "Is it dawn?"

"Mami, it is dawn," I said rubbing my eyes.

"You still look very tired."

"I am alright," I said. "And you, Mami, did you sleep well?"

"Does an old woman really sleep? Instead, I see visions when I go to bed; I see things fleeting through my mind. I was always worried about your wellbeing, wondering which part of the world you were at that moment. The night before you arrived, I saw you flying and flying like a bird. This night, it was your father I was seeing welcoming you from your journey. Aha, that reminds me. You must visit your father in the shrine and tell him that you have returned", said my mother. "When I saw your father in a dream he was not happy. He kept asking about the one he put in place to continue to stretch his umbilical cord." She paused then continued. "Child, do not hesitate to visit your father. I know you have gone to many places in the world and learned many new things but a

woodpecker always returns to its hole however far it flies into the forest. Visit your father before your friends and relations come to greet you; before the heat drives the ancestral spirits further into the underground,” she said going out of the sitting room. She stopped suddenly and as an afterthought she said, “You have not told me how you met your brother. You will tell me when you would have had enough rest.”

When my mother left the room, I sat back on the bed for a while wondering why she was so concerned about my visiting the ancestral shrine. I had long forgotten about the place where my father used to perform rituals in honor of his ancestors when we were children. I had believed that the shrine no longer had a place in modern life. And as I went to college and continued the academic trip to the university I didn’t think I should be easily steered into primitive cultures. I was a modern man, a civilized man and believed that some old traditions ought to be discarded. Thus my vision of the ancestral shrine especially after the death of my father became fuzzier until I completely lost sight of it, except for the image of a hut with a tattered roof attached to the back of the main building that still hung hazily in my mind. It was when my mother insisted that I visit the shrine that the hut and memories surrounding it came alive in my mind. I stood up from the bed, took my tooth brush and as I brushed my teeth I took a closer look at my room. It seemed cleaner than I initially expected, knowing that I had seen cleaner and decent places in the sprawling cities of the United States. It was bright outside.

The rays of the early morning sun filtered through the bedroom window and it was not like the street lamps that glowed all night and one never knew what time of night it was in the cities. It was different here because even that early morning, I heard the song of the partridge and the intermittent crow of cocks around the homestead. And it was clear that the darkness was beginning to brighten and clear off from the surface of the earth.

Several people had come to greet me that morning before going to their farms. When they heard I was still in bed they left promising to be back again. It could be seen from the number of dishes of food that lined up on the dining table, left by the wives of friends and relations. I opened some of the dishes and the delicious smell assailed me even when I stepped outdoors to savor the fragrance of the cool morning and to have a closer look at the environment which I could not appreciate the previous evening because I had arrived at nightfall. It was very bright outside, a bright chilly morning with little gusts of fresh air I could feel on my body. From the little hill behind my bedroom window I could see where my father's main compound stood.

My father's compound was part of a big coffee farm interspersed with various food crops and fruit trees. The homestead was demarcated by a hedge consisting a line of closely spaced shrubs and trees planted to mark the boundary and to keep away stray goats and pigs from neighboring compounds. The compound was made up of a number of houses in which my father's wives lived. In the rear of the courtyard flanked on both sides by the women's houses stood the main house, my father's own house which consisted of a spacious *lemoo* and a number of bedrooms and a veranda. My father used to spend much of his time in it when he was in the compound. The family would assemble in the *lemoo* especially in the evening to spend time with him. It also hosted family events. My father lived in the house with some of the bigger children while each woman had her own house consisting of a bedroom, a small parlor and a food and firewood store.

I took my traveling bag which contained mainly gifts and walked down the road descending to the compound to greet my father's wives and children. The fresh breeze from Atungong carried with it the fragrance of the flowers and trees that livened up my nerves. On the flank of the road into the compound where the chain of houses formed a semi-circle I met my father's second wife near her house on that side of the

compound from which I came in. As soon as I stepped on the courtyard, she rushed out of the house and embraced me.

“Did you sleep well, child,” she asked.

“I slept very well, Mother,” I said.

“Thank the gods,” she said. “We could not greet each other well last night because there were so many people. We hear you travelled to the red man’s country.”

“Yes, Mother,” I said.

“When did you return?” she asked.

“It is not long since I returned,” I said.

“How is our husband? Did you see him?” She asked after a little hesitation.

“I saw him, Mother,” I said.

“Our gods are not asleep,” she said in a loud voice. The other wives came out to the courtyard with their children and met us. They folded their arms on their chests and looked curiously at me eager to get the slightest hint about my brother.

“He did not send us greetings?” she said.

“He sent.” I said.

“Why is he not coming home to see his wives and children?” asked my father’s third wife. “Can a homestead stand without its stalk?”

“He told me he will be coming soon,” I said, noticing the growing anxiety and tense atmosphere.

“Did you travel well?” asked my father’s second wife.

“I travelled well, Mother,” I said.

“Welcome,” she said returning to her house with a sour expression on her face. The smile on the faces of the other wives faded visibly and the excitement with which they came out to greet me melted away as they went back to their houses. The children remained with me on the courtyard. Some held me by the hand; others were struggling to open the bag I had in my left hand to see what was inside. I opened the bag and gave them little gifts. They ran about excitedly. Some took theirs and fled to their mother’s houses and then returned to ask for more while others examined theirs with amazement,

wanting to know immediately what they could use them for. And for long the children would not allow me go until I went behind the compound to look at the hill sinking into a valley. I passed through a narrow opening between two houses and went behind the compound. On the right flank, I saw another hill rising from the valley stretching towards Atungong, another neighborhood which shared boundaries with Anya.

Not far from where I stood, my eye fell on a hut roofed with thatches, attached to the back of the main house. The door was made from bamboo and could be easily pushed aside. This was the ancestral shrine where my father stored the spiritual secrets of the household. I saw it from a close distance as I walked into the farm enraptured by the exuberant green vegetation with foliage spread out in the thickets where there were no crops. Parts of the right wall had collapsed and the thatches on the roof had decayed significantly. Moss and other weed covered the entrance and the walls were hemmed by thicker vegetation in the coffee farm. It appeared that since my father died no one had gone in there to commune with the living dead. I walked down towards the raffia bush. The plants' spear-like leaves shot up proudly down there in the southernmost part of the homestead. I continued walking down towards the valley, towards the sacred core of the village, occasionally startled by rats and lizards that raced across my path, wondering why my mother insisted on my visiting the shrine to talk to my father.

My mother was a devoted convert of the Roman Catholic Church. She had introduced me to Catholic faith from birth. But it seemed that she never really lost grip of the spiritual essence of her ancestors. The two faiths resided in her soul and each had occasion for expression, either during her normal Sunday morning worship and events organized by the church or during a village cultural activity which required the performance of rites and rituals. But the tilt towards traditional beliefs was clearly evident in her ageing years, especially because she could not walk the long distance to the church as

she did when she was young. She had told me not long before that in this matter of the church, let the trap be sensible and so the animal too. I kept wondering why she was urging me to visit the ancestral shrine. She was an early Christian of the Roman Catholic Church when it was first established in Lewoh country. Being the first of my father's five wives, she was quick at finding favor with the priest who generally discouraged polygamous marriages and did not welcome any person involved in polygamy to belong to the church. The church preached one man, one wife. As my mother told me, the church accepted her because she was the first woman from a polygamous home to become a Christian and the deed of conversion was accepted by the priest as a way of making my father abandon his four other wives and accompany my mother to church. She made mention of a chief who had abandoned his twelve wives after baptism and got married to a woman who also accepted baptism. Many others did same before they were admitted in the church. My mother became a devoted Roman Catholic Christian who never failed to do her duties even before the catechist announced the arrival of the priest.

My mind went back to the small Catholic Church in Lewoh where I was baptized a few days after my birth. My mother used to dress me fancifully and carry me to church. When I started going to church on my own I fell in love with the songs in Latin....of *Dominus Vobiscu. Es cons spiri tutu...* this was the part of the mass that interested me most and I loved singing thereafter without really understanding the wordings of the songs. Yet the old village folk sang it with such spirited delight, as if they participated in crafting the wordings with the Bishop of Rome. Some who didn't really master the wordings sang in their own ways. Mbe Masala, one of the oldest converts followed the tone of the songs but created and sang the lyrics in Nweh:

Nden nwontieb gi
a le kwo ndia fo
a geoh me foh?
OOOOOOOO!

As I went down the path surrounded by bushes towards the valley, the song and its words came vividly to my mind. I could not make any sense of it at that early age. But at the moment that I meditated over the issue it became clear that the old man definitely had his own concerns, expressed in his own wordings which translated literally into English was: “The old man who entered this house; where has he gone to?”

My faith in Christianity never wavered. There was no cause to have it so especially when I received early baptism. My mother, a regular and active Christian, took me to church regularly and prayed whenever she was passing near the little sanctuary of Holy Maria, as she often called it. It was a finely crafted bronze statue in red robes and gold details placed in a little room surrounded by wild thorny flowers at a road junction into the village center. By the time I reached Class Five I became a mass servant. I helped to clean the sacristy before Father Tom arrived Lewoh mission station from Mbeta once every two months. Before his arrival, every Christian had to prepare himself or herself for the Holy Communion. Preparing oneself meant attending doctrines regularly, participating in the cleaning of the church and its premises, washing the priest's toilet, attending choir practice, and sometimes cleaning the cemetery. The old Catholic Church was situated on a broad ridge overlooking the football field and the Roman Catholic Mission School. It was the only church in Lewoh country and its neighborhood at the time. The road that led to the Roman Catholic Mission School and the church from the main road was the same, except that it diverted at the edge of the school field at the left and climbed to the church while other paths continued to the classrooms from the field. A flight of steps led to the entrance. On the front, to the left,

from the eaves of the roof hung a huge bell, a string descending from the clapper of the hollow vessel to the height of an adult. It was the string that the catechist pulled and the bell produced the hallowed sonorous sound that travelled across the ridges, the hills and valleys to summon the Christians scattered across the land. Lewoh country lay sanctified with the profound sonorous clang of the bell that sank deep into the souls of men and women.

To the left of the church entrance was a small building that served as a presbytery. It was made up of two rooms and a toilet in which was a marble pot. Those who cleaned the toilet admired the marble pot yet they often doubted why any man in his sane self would eat and stool in the same house. The villagers were used to pit toilets built far away from the compound. Some said the priest's stool could be very nourishing for pigs because they ate mostly tin foods that had been prepared in a special way, not roast cocoyams and palm oil and *abeb nchi*.

Inside the church was a big hollow, with a flight of windows high up the wall with wooden shutters on both sides separated by mosaic paintings and images of the station of the cross. There were two rows of pews separated by remarkable space that formed the nave of the church. Deep into the heart of the building was an altar. On the front center of the altar stood a concrete table, perpetually covered with white cloth, in which was buried the holy stone of mosaic structure. Front right, adjacent to the table was a reading stand with its flat surface tilting inwards where the Bible was placed. On the rear of the altar was the place of recess, the apse. The priest and mass boys sat there during offertory or when the congregation or choir was singing. On the right rear was the entrance into the sacristy which projected in to the jaw of the building from exterior view. There was no ceiling and one could see the giant planks that crisscrossed the vast roof on which lay corrugated sheets that sealed the top while their edges rested on the shoulders of the cracked mud brick walls. The dry paste of the

mud bricks, the stale water possibly from a leakage on the roof that had betrayed the dust on the floor gave the church a peculiar perpetual smell that became part of the incense of sanctification. Whenever I left the church I felt my mind very free and pure as the familiar scent of the church lingered in it.

Besides the stale scent, was the uncanny sacred quietness that surrounded the church building. After church services on Sundays, the buildings stood deserted and awful on the hill. At times the church veranda became an abode for mad people. It was also rumored that ghosts occupied the premises at night. I remember a mad woman who usually sat on the veranda of the church building talking alone and gesticulating. We were usually frightened by her presence when we were going to school. I used to see her from a distance singing and shouting alone like a ghost who had come out of one of the graves in the church cemetery across the road. At night the crosses painted white projected at the north end of the graves looked like ghosts sitting on their graves. The only sign of life during the week was the catechist's house on the right of the church. Crossing the mission area in the night was an awful experience, sacred, yet frightening. But my mind had become addicted to the church that even the talk about ghosts did not scare me anymore. My devotion to God was firm and into His care, as my mother had always told me, I had entrusted my protection and the will to make me become what I wanted to be in future.

Four

Father Tom usually arrived at the mission station on Saturday afternoon after every month. He spent the rest of the day hearing confessions. This was to prepare the penitents for the celebration of the holy Eucharist on Sunday. I was usually amongst the first persons to welcome Father Tom. Sometimes, I went with some altar servants a little distance towards the Mbetta road to wait for him and then accompany him to the presbytery and set up his belongings. He met the church premises sparkling. The only work left was the flushing of his toilet with water carried in a bucket. The catechist did this every morning for the days that the priest spent in the village. I worked in the sacristy, dusting the wardrobe, sunning the stale altar boys vestments. I loved the surplices. They were decorated with embroideries along the hem of the sleeves and the bottom of the garment. The loosely fitting garments extended to the knees, won over red cassocks. And when we, the altar boys wore them, we could experience our souls welded firmly to Catholic faith in word and in deed, especially when we led the priest in the solemnity of the procession to the altar at the start of the liturgy. I was usually delighted to be in the first rank of the church. After Father Tom, the altar servers were next to God. I believed that as an altar boy, God could not hesitate to listen to my prayers. God was going to listen to my prayers, give me preference and pave my way towards my most desired aspirations.

Much of the mass was said in Latin and some of the church hymns in English were truly solemn and melodious. I still remembered the first verse of my favorite hymn which fixed in my imagination alluring images of Holy City: Jerusalem, my happy home...When shall I come to thee...when shall the sorrows have an end... Thy joys when shall I see... O happy harbor of the saints... O sweet and

pleasant soil... In thee no sorrow may be found.... No grief, no care, no toil....

Whenever I sang that song, I covered my eyes and saw God's holy kingdom with angels and sanctified souls immersed in bliss, the angels singing with me and aping me on their wings round and round the Garden of Eden. Jerusalem was the Promised Land, the Garden of Eden, God's holy city filled with glory. The catechist, a devout vigorous middle-aged man, chattered prayers in Latin when the priest was not around and the illiterate folk repeated after him. I always wondered whether the villagers understood what they regurgitated in Latin. I had also noticed that Father Tom did not like Nweh songs because he said they were songs of heathen rites, "pagan songs", as he called them. I did not understand the songs myself, even the litany that was said in Latin. And yet I wondered whether the illiterate folk understood the priest. In any case, as I told myself, God understood every language because he was the creator of all things and he knew everyone's mind. Even God was monitoring the questions that I asked in my mind. And I tried to forget those questions lest I committed a sin against God and block my chances of going to Heaven. But why was it that all priests were white men? And Satan, with bulky long curved horns was always painted black? Why did priests eat mostly eggs? Old women always brought eggs to give to Father Tom when they went for confession. The priest usually handed the eggs to me, then blessed the old woman who brought them saying: "O God, Father in Heaven above, accept her sacrifice. Accept her confession and forgive her for all her sins. Prepare her for eternal glory in your kingdom through your son Jesus Christ, Amen." He would say then cross the old woman. The old woman would go away doubly bent, her eyes covered and her palms brought together in front of her chest as she meditated in union with God, sanctified with the blood of Christ, while Father Tom turned round to ensure that I kept the eggs in a safe place. O God, Father in Heaven above. Heaven above, I thought, above in

the blue sky. Was there another country above the sky? How did such a place look like? Was it the place where Father Tom told us good people went to when they died? Was it not said in the village that only wizards and evil spirits visit the sky? Had I not always gone to ceremonies with my father in the village and people talked about their gods and ancestors living in the earth, and who gave the living food, water, fire and air from the earth? No. I was committing a mortal sin. I was violating the ways of God in Heaven above by thinking about heathen worship which Father Tom said was the work of Satan. O God, forgive me for thinking about false gods. There is only one God, the Almighty God. O God, help me to wash away the evil thoughts before they come into my mind. I had committed a mortal sin and I made up my mind that the next time Father Tom visited I was going to confess to God through him and cleanse my mind before receiving Holy Communion.

When Father Tom came the following month, I was one of the first persons to go for confession. I sat on one of the big rocks in front of the church waiting for him until he arrived. I ran a few errands for him and set the dais near the altar for confession. When he was ready, I met him at the altar, knelt in front of him, crossed myself and confessed my sins then said the confession prayer and he blessed me. After the confession, I had some time to chat with him, especially as there were very few people around. He told me I should never again think of Satan gods. God in Heaven, he said, was the only one who had the powers to decide how my life was going to be.

“Where did God come from?” I asked Father Tom.

“God was living before everything. He made the world,” he replied.

“Where does He live?”

“In Heaven above.”

“Where is Heaven above?”

“Heaven is everywhere.”

I thought again briefly. How could God be in Heaven above and at the same time everywhere?

“Why do we not see Him?” I asked further.

“We see Him,” said Father Tom. “We see Him through the image of His only begotten son, Jesus Christ whom He sent to redeem the world from sin,” he said.

“Why does He not come to talk to us Himself?” I asked.

“He talks to us not as man does. He talks to us through the Holy Spirit. If you obey God you will see the good things in your life that your heart desires. If you were ill you will recover fast enough. If you are hungry God will provide food in plenty. If you want to go to college and you prayed regularly God will listen to your prayers and you will be a brilliant fellow in school just as you are now. You are an intelligent chap. You ask very important questions and it is God who has made you who you are. And this is because of your faith in Him. God does not talk to us directly. God talks to us through the good things He does to us. For example, He gives us water and the air we breathe. Imagine staying for five minutes without air or for five days without drinking water. You will die. God speaks to us through the good things he has given us,” Father Tom explained.

“Why did God make the world?” I asked.

“Because He wanted people to be happy with the good things he created in the universe. Are you not happy with your life?”

“I am happy, Father. But I am not happy with my father. Sometimes he beats my mother,” I said.

“It is because your father is not a Christian. He worships idols... he worships Satan,” said Father Tom. An old lady had come close to the altar. He then blessed me again and asked me to go. As I went away I was slightly disappointed because Father Tom did not answer my questions the way I wanted him to. I wanted to know God personally, to pray to Him and confess my sins to him without passing through Father Tom. I wanted to know Him so that I could present my problem to

Him whenever I wanted. But I kept my devotion to God, serving Him as a mass boy in the most sacred way I could afford, being though a primary school child at the time. When later I was a student in Seat of Wisdom College I reached the pinnacle of my faith as an altar boy by participating in the ordination of three priests; I carried the bishop's crozier or mitre or led the entry procession to the altar with the thurible incensing and sending away evil spirits from the church before the appearance of His Lordship.

My father, on the other hand, was a bad convert, which almost caused the excommunication of my mother from the church. As my mother told me the story, my father went to church once and swore he would never step foot in that place again. He said the men and women who went to church were those who went there to gossip about their wives and husbands to the red man. Why was he himself not married? They were the ones that created problems in the country. They were the Satans, king wizards and sorcerers, perpetrators of broken homes and problems of inheritance. Each time my father found them going to church, he would whisper aloud: "See them going. Those are the Satans. They swallowed people's children this night, and now they are going to church in the morning to praise God." And so my father turned towards his ancestors. He had built the shrine in the backyard of the main house of the compound in which he displayed relics of his ancestors and offered sacrifices to them at different times of the year.

This was the little hut with a thatch roof in which were exhibited in linear order and covered in clay pots what he called the "heads of the dead". As we grew up and went to the Roman Catholic Mission School to learn Christian education, my father still found a means to initiate us into ancestral beliefs and rituals in the shrine. This was the shrine where my mother wanted me to go and talk with my father whose "head" had been laid in ancestral rank. But I had long considered this

worship heathen practice even with my mother's growing pressure on me to visit the shrine.

I moved towards the raffia bush in the valley bordering Atungong. A voice called, sounding as if it were in a vacuum. It sounded like that of a fairy in the underworld. "Wooh Oooh!" the voice sounded repeatedly. Then after some recollections I understood that it was my mother's voice. That was the familiar way she used to call me from a distance when I was a child. As a child with other children, we were friends with the thickets and the little forests surrounding our compound. And the easier way to reach me was to call the way she did. It was interesting to hear her call me in that fond way she used to do when I was a child. I did not answer as I did in the days and I was not returning as soon as I had thought. Sure, she would have gone around the compound looking for me. She called again and the voice echoed in the valley in multiple directions. It was as if some spirits that inhabited the valleys were mimicking her call. I could hear her voice going deeper and deeper like the voice of a siren down the valley until it faded. The echoes now seemed to have changed, reverberating across the valley loud and clearly: "*Ofeuh leh! Ofeuh leh!*" Then the echo carried the voices in relays across the valleys and hills. I stood there, my mind filled with multiple voices that spoke, some in Nweh and others in English: Come well, Prince of the Hills! Come well, child of Nweh-Mbinzeah! Come well, sibling of the leopard...."

I went towards a big boulder that lay on the way to the stream. The road to the stream stretched out to the right in a tiny path. The stream was now visible but the little pool in which we used to bathe and play had dried up. It was usually exciting to meet children and women from other homesteads that came to bathe and carry water. We played hide-and-seek and other games around the stream and at times we hid in the nearby bushes to peep at girls and women bathing. When the women discovered us they would throw stones and other objects at us, cursing, and we would vamoose in the thickets.

Sometimes we spent so much time in the stream until our mothers would call. At times we earned a little slap on our backs for the offence but the pain was not usually worth the amusement we had playing in the stream. On Lewoh market days when the population swelled in the stream we stayed longer and invited the wrath of our mothers. There were days that playing degenerated into scuffles and fighting, often starting with the quarrel about who ought to carry water before the other. The other children stood aside to cheer the fighters. Sometimes it was a free-for-all fight with children from one neighborhood pitted against those from another neighborhood.

Standing on the large boulder I had a closer look at the stream. It still had its slanting flat surface about the size of the floor of a moderate sitting room that clearly distinguished itself from the vegetation. We sat, slept or crouched on it to play or put the dresses we washed in the stream to get dry. My eyes fell on the raffia palm groves, the tall slender plants with verdant leaves shot out in the low-lying area. I went down from the boulder tracing my path in the bushes towards the very base of the valley. The wet muddy soil with fallen, thorny branches could not permit me to go deep into the dark core of the raffia bush. But I stood there amidst the croaking noises of frogs and the chirping birds and the songs of the cricket and once or twice, I heard the coo of an owl. My heart beat faster at the thought of it. The villagers always said that these were birds of ill omen, mostly people's totems. The most dangerous one was that which made the sound of a whistle and flashed lights across the sky in the night. They were wizards' totems. When it cooed again, I raised my eyes and saw a velvet-colored owl staring at me with eyes rolling in its head as if it were fixing me on the altar of evil. It bore a sinister look, turned its head fully round and back again, winked several times in a sinister manner then stared at me and produced a very loud and scary noise. My feet trembled, my hair stood on end, and a chill ran through my spine. Before I knew what I was doing I was

already rushing past the boulder and climbing up the tract to the compound.

Five

A number of people, amongst whom was Anyileke's father, were seated in the parlor when I returned. Anyileke was the girl my mother had contacted for marriage to my brother at his request. She was studying in a university hoping to leave for the United States as soon as my brother made up his mind to come for her. And she had been waiting for more than three years. Her father rose to greet me stooping lightly and offering a handshake supported by his left hand.

"Welcome, in-law", he said and regained his seat. Bombabili was also present. They were talking hilariously when I came in. My mother sat in the far end of the parlor and when I came in she surveyed me curiously.

"Did you have problems down in the compound or why are you sweating like someone who has escaped from trouble," said my mother.

"I was down in the raffia palm bush", I said.

"True, there are many strangers on your trouser," said Bombabili who rushed towards me and started picking off the sticky grains of the *leleng* plant.

"Doing what in the raffia bush this early morning?" asked my mother.

"Just visiting the places I used to know," I said.

"I thought people like you who have visited the red man's country don't like going into our bushes when you come to the village," said my mother.

"A wise child never forgets where his umbilical cord was buried," said Anyileke's father.

"Child," said my mother. "Have you greeted your father's wives?"

"Yes, Mami," I replied.

“You have done well, child. The little sow wanders off but it always returns to feel the company of others. Your father should be very happy with you. Many relations and friends have been here to greet you but you were not around. They left and promised to return when you wake from sleep,” said my mother. I greeted the guests who were still around and we chatted for some time and then I ordered for a jug of raffia wine, and invited the guests to the table for a meal. When I opened the dishes the steaming aroma of the food hit my senses and my mouth watered. I wondered whether one could call this breakfast because it was heavy food. The villagers never really cared about eating heavy food in the morning because the energy expended on their agrarian chores left them always wanting more food. There was *egusi* pudding and plantains, *khoki* and yams, *abeh-nchi*, *abeh-bedee* and a variety of other meals. But I preferred *abeh-bedee*. *Abeh* was pounded foofoo from female cocoyams. The *bedee* was the crushed sap of cocoyam plant, prepared with crabs and tadpoles. It was said in the village that anyone who prepared you that meal had organized a feast for you. I ate it with relish, not even willing to share that particular dish with any person. The id in me was in control and I ate, quietly, hardly lifting my head, nodding to Bombabili who had an urgent gossip on his lips. But he had the task of deciding whether he should finish his meal first before continuing the story or to immediately release the latest gossip. He seemed to have chosen the former option and I could see him yank off big morsels of the *egusi* pudding and the yams observing the natural rule that the mouth that is full does not stray off with words.

Bombabili was the first to finish. The empty dish stood before him gaping at him and I could spot him looking yearningly towards my own dishes. I said nothing. He wiped his mouth, filled his mug with wine and gulped it.

“Dokta, thank you,” he said in English. “This was a *kokastic* meal. As I was saying before I was politely interrupt with the *kokastic* meal.” He wiped his lips again with the palm of his

hand, uttered more English expressions before speaking in Nweh. "So you people have not heard the new one in the village?"

"Only you can tell us, Bomba," said my mother. "At this age, can I go far from the house? Only those of you with young limbs can walk distances to bring us news."

"What is it all about?" asked Anyileke's father.

"It is about lust for women," said Bombabili.

"Could there be anything else?" said one of the women.

"Can any story in Lewoh be told without hinging on that?"

"Tell us the story," said Anyileke's father.

"Wanda sha neva end," said Bombabili. His real name was Anumbondem. But the name Bombabili had stuck to him like gum.

"Bomba, tell us our story and do not bother about what anyone is saying," said Anyileke's father.

"I will tell you the story to and fro," he said "Nkembepfok and Nkembeteh has grip each one on the throat," said Bombabili.

"Why so?" asked my mother.

"This one say I am the one wiping the tears of Emesong, this one say I am the one," said Bombabili.

"Who is Emesong?" asked Anyileke's father.

"Don't you know Emesong?" asked my mother. "She is the youngest of Fuo Beyano's wives."

"I now see what he is talking about," said Anyileke's father.

"Let me tell you if you don know. Nkembeteh and Nkembepfok collide in Emesong house in the night yesterday. Nkembeteh come after, then vex too much and he leave the house and went and hide in a bush until Nkembepfok was passing after long long time. He grip him on the throat and swear that he wul kill him if he see him again in that woman house. They started to fight, Nkembeteh, tear his throat with his nail. Some people were passing and separate them. Nkembeteh said he start wiping the woman's tears a long time ago."

“Is that what happened?” asked Anyileke’s father.

“Thas what happen. The whole country has heard the news,” said Bombabili.

“Gods of my ancestors!” said a woman sitting near Bombabili. “Was it not this same Nkembepfok who caused a lot of trouble when Bekecha died? Was he not the one who took the widow to a meat slab in a market stall and in the act the bamboo slab collapsed? A bamboo pierced him on the groin and he has never since learned a lesson? Is it *ndoh* working on him? Has he been cursed?”

“With two wife in his compound,” said Bombabili. “I was in the market that night when the meat slab collapse. We was drinking just near there when we hear a loud noise of dry bamboo broking. People run to the place and see too much blood. The woman run into the farm behind Tanyi’s house.”

“Bomba,” said Anyileke’s father. “You tell the story as if you were there when they started.”

“I saw everything to and fro,” said Bomba. “Everything. Was not the whole village singing him in the song? Do you not remember the song again?” He went on to sing.

Yeeh!

Anu mbei leh

Totit

anu mbei leh

Totit.

Njang ageh lakieh?

Njang ageh te nguo anchu nti meh

Mpfen ageh leh qwem, qwem, qwem

Anu mbei leh

Totit

Yeb, anu mbei leh, totit

Mbe’a teh ntonga leh

Totit

Mbe'a teh nsue leh

Totit

Mbe'a teh ndeh leh

Totit

Njang ageh lakieh?

Njang ageh te nguo anchu nti meh

Mpfen ageh leh qwem, qwem, qwem....

“How could the two men do a thing like this when the chief has not yet traveled to meet his ancestors?” asked my mother.

“Even when the church and the *Lefem* are still pulling the cord?” added Anyileke’s father. “What will the successor of Fuo Beyano inherit if other people start fighting to own his father’s wives now?”

“The children are not interested,” said Bombabili. They say they are Christen pipu and they don wan satanical culture. Thas why they are still dragging the rope with Nyatemeh. They say their father wul not be bury by juju. This mean that whoever is successor will not care about the widow. And so someone must be the one to manipulate them. This is simple logic which I have examine to and fro”, he said.

A man approached the door, knocked and entered, fixing his black raffia cap firmly on his head. The raffia cap looked worn-out but some title holder would say it was a symptom of age. A red feather pointed diagonally from the left side of the cap. He wore a jumper and a black pair of trousers and sandals. He was my friend’s uncle, Ndi Nkemlegangambong, who never failed to come to greet whenever he heard that I was in the village.

“I greet everyone,” he said.

“Ndi Nkem, welcome,” said my mother ushering him to a seat with a gesture. He was one of Atemangwat’s notables who

being the highest title holder in the parlor at the time, had to be given a special seat at the rear of the parlor.

“Welcome, Ndi,” I stood up and greeted him.

“Welcome, my child. I should be the one to say “welcome” because you are coming from faraway,” he said. Bombabili offered him some colanuts and a mug of wine. He removed his wine horn from his raffia bag and tapped the open mouth on his palm a number of times and then showed it to Bombabili who filled it with wine. As he drank, I could discern from his countenance that he was not just an ordinary visitor. He seemed to be in a hurry or he was really on an errand from the speed with which he drank the first draught. He emptied the horn and when Bombabili wanted to fill it again he asked him to wait for a while. He was now standing. He ran his palms across his face, cleared his throat and spoke.

“My child, as our elders say the drum never confiscates a message,” he said taking as much time as possible to disclose the real content of the message. “Nyatemeh, Atemangwat, the Lion of Anya Lewoh sends you greetings. I told him that I was coming to greet you and he sent you plenty of greetings.” He ended his message, stretched his arm to have the horn filled then he sat down and continued gulping the liquid.

“Is the *Lefem* still holding in the palace,” asked Anyileke’s father.

“It is still holding. We have been there since morning,” said Ndi Nkemlegangambong.

“That matter will take long to settle,” said Anyileke’s father.

“I have never seen a matter like this,” said Ndi Nkemlegangambong. “Even the chiefs and the notables are split over the issue and Atemangwat is taking his time to end the matter, as he says, in a way that will not hurt anyone.”

“Someone must be hurt,” said my mother. “Two elephants cannot wage a fight without putting down trees.”

“*Lefem* will continue to meet until the matter is settled. Atemangwat would have given up to the church if he were

some other person. But he knows he is sitting on a stool which is supported by his ancestors,” said Ndi Nkemlegangambong.

The greetings from Atemangwat filled my mind with anxiety. I knew he always had kind words for me but I was not always comfortable going towards him because it required a lot of protocol as tradition demands. And that protocol, I was not very familiar with. Even when his father reigned I always found it difficult to approach him or visit the palace. Visiting the palace required a lot of ethical behavior and once anyone went contrary to the norms he was faced with a heavy fine. And so I dreaded the palace. One stood the risk of paying fines for not behaving according to tradition, for sitting where you were not supposed to sit, or greeting in an improper way. Besides, there were certain parts of the palace that were out of bounds to outsiders.

When Ndi Nkemlegangambong finished his drink and announced his departure, I accompanied him outside and tried to find out when he would be through with palace matters so I could visit him. He informed me he had a busy schedule that day. *Achemalemoob* was already meeting that day to settle disputes involving some households. They had just finished with the matter between Nkembeteh and Nkembepek and *Lefem* would meet later to continue to find out a way to end the dispute concerning Chief Beyano. He said he was involved in all the commissions and wasn't sure when he would go back home.

“Dokta,” said Bombabili as soon as I returned. “You don't understand Nweh. When Atemangwat send you salute, is not just salute. It mean that he know that you are in the village and you knows what you are sopos to do as a responsible Lewoh man.”

“What am I to do then?” I asked.

“You sopos to go to the palace and salute the father of the land,” said Bomba.

“Bomba, you speak wisely,” said Anyileke's father.

“And you do not go to the palace with your hand folded. The palace also drink wine that come from America. Atemangwat can even gives you honor,” said Bomba.

“In what way?” I asked.

“He initiate you to the *ngumba* house to eat goat trotters,” said Bombabili. He belched consistently and his feet dangled slightly on the ground as he stood up and tried to move. I sat for a while without speaking but my mind was at work. Why would I allow myself to be initiated into fossilized cultures? Would I still come back to entertain village fetish and cultist practices? I thought I was in a good position to educate these people, to let them see that the world is thousands of years away from old cultural practices. Accepting any form of initiation was compromising my Christian faith which I had acquired early in youth. My mother who introduced me to it might begin to have wavering thoughts about it. That could be understood. She was growing old and her ideas were changing to adapt to the life of the village like most of the other villagers. Some old cultural practices had to be discarded so that the people could follow an obvious modern trend where the lantern shows on every foot as we walk towards the achievement of the ultimate goal of happiness.

“Atemangwat wul honor you,” said Bombabili. “He wul cover your head. You don know who you are? You are Dokta, a ganacologis of books. How many of you are in this village? Atemangwat wul gives you honor.”

“How do you know Bomba,” asked a young man at a corner, the same young man that had teased Bombabili the previous evening. His name was Akanya.

“*Abangalebin*, let me teach you what you don knows. Some of us have travel and we can see things to and fro,” said Bombabili.

“The furthest place you have ever been to is Lekeng where you went to settle your wife’s dowry,” said Akanya.

“And what about that? My friend, let me tell you, I am a proud Lewoh man. He who does not knows the value of the

navel wul never think of his umbilical cord. What do you find other where that I cannot find in this village? I did not vagabond to England to learn how to speaks English. I learn it in Lewoh. *Moi parler, toi parler?*” said Bomba.

“That is not English, it is French,” said Akanya.

“I speak everything that is a language. *Nyambeh*, you do not know to whom are speaking,” said Bombabili pointing towards Akanya. “I went to Lekeng and brought my wife. She deliver my children. They are the citizen of this village. If there is a war they increase number of soldier. Those of you who has travel, what have you? *Salopa*. Mbe Tatambang, my grandfather, travel to those people country when they come here and arrest him as a soldier to fight Second World War. Do you know the meaning of Second World War?” he asked.

“No,” said Akanya.

“Embezard! You cannot knows. My grandfather return from the Second World War wit a *gramophone* and a *double-barre*. He told us that he see thing with his own eye; he see thing with his eye and wanda whether those pipu worship the same God that they bring to Africa? He said, man soldier was doing thing with man soldier. Wanda sha neva end. He said he saw man kill man and eat him raw without cooking; that million people was kill like ant by the holicot; that million people was put in a oven and fry like ant....”

“How can the holy ghost kill people?” asked Akanya.

“Embezard, I said holicot. I cannot blame you. Half-edu. Incomplete *matamaphosis*,” said Bombabili. “I am telling you what you don knows. *Swine-de-monkey*...! *Kwinya!* Do you know who is a slave? *Abuh*. *Go ma’a abuh*,” He said emphatically in Nweh then continued. “You are only good to be took to the door of no return back in the coast where my grandfather said his father’s junior brother was take to the coast and he never return back. They put chain on their neck and on their foot like swine and drag them to the coast. Many people die. When they die those people throw them in the big water they call sea as if they don belong to anywhere. Have you hear of the door to no

return back? If you tell me what is it, I wul give you one beers. Do you knows it?"

"Yes," said the boy.

"Is a lie. You don't know. You want to crook me. But let me tell you, you cannot crook a crooket man. You don't know the door to no return. Bastard without a father and a mother," said Bombabili ending in a very high pitch.

"Who is looking for trouble with Bomba again? Won't you people allow him to chat with his friend?" asked my mother. At that moment Anyileke's father stood to go and my mother followed him outside. I saw them through the window going towards my cousin's compound conversing intimately, moving a few steps, stopping and conversing then moving a few more steps.

"He does not know to who he is talking to," continued Bombabili. "I have build a compound not a house. I left my father compound and build my own. I have the right to talk in this land."

"You mean those thatch houses?" asked Akanya.

"Even if they are a thatch house, I live in it with my three wife and my children. I owe no body. I am no a vagabond. I am satisfy wit what I have. I am a proud Lewoh man. When you people talk the beautiful place you have go to, I talk the beautiful place I was born to. I was born in Lewoh, I have travel in Lewoh. Lewoh is a capital city."

I had the feeling that his pronouncements were referring to me. I felt really guilty. But what cause had he to express such words against me? I didn't think he was challenging me. It could just have been his own way of expressing himself about the issues of the world. But his pronouncements made me feel a little worried. His mention of the God brought to Africa made me to start questioning a people's acts and their correlation with belief and whether or not one had the right to judge people's faith by the acts they performed. Then I thought of the experiences I had gone through in the company of the seventeen multinationals in my recent trip abroad. Could any

one judge action by one's faith? My mind was crowded and I put my head in my palm and when I raised it I felt very light. This is someone who could talk boastfully about his identity. He proved that he had defined his space and was comfortable in it. I wondered where such courage and wisdom came from. But me, I was a vagabond and a stranger in my home. The ground on which I stood was slippery and my feet could not have any balance on the ground. I ran my palm across my face and when I opened my eyes there was an urgent craving to discover Truth. And the better way was to understand the deeper reality that fuelled the conflict between the church and the palace. I made up my mind to visit the palace.

My mother returned not long after the guests had left. Her face bore the expression of some internal disharmony which she seemed to be in a hurry to reveal to me.

"Nkue-ndem" she said, leaning the staff she was holding on the wall, adjusting a chair and sitting on it with a lot of effort that made me think I ought to help her sit down. I looked up at her trying to understand the sour expression which suddenly shrouded her face. And when she called my name it was as if she had taken me back to primal youth.

"Nkue-ndem, I came up this morning to ask you about your brother", she went on. "I wanted us to talk about him last night but you were tired. Did you say you saw your brother?" She seldom called me by the name she just called, even when I was young. She called me names like "Chabelleh", "Iwe", "Eshuo" which all had their own stories to tell, just like my real name which she called in its real original form, "Nkue-ndem" which meant "God's message". I wondered who the God was. Was He the one my father worshipped or the one my mother worshipped at the time I was born? How the name came to be written and pronounced thereafter, I could not tell. Certainly, a hasty fellow registered my name during my first school attendance as Kendem, dictated by his own ill-conceived ego and the name got stuck to my being and certificates for the rest of my life. And when I went to university and continued with

graduate studies, the villagers ignored my real name and called me “Dokta”. So the name my mother just called was lost. When she called the name that morning it was like she was retrieving me from a lost world and placing me in my original world. My lost body and senses seemed to have been redeemed....

“Nkue-ndem, why are you suddenly quiet? Is there something you are hiding from me?” she asked.

“No Mami. Why should I hide anything from you?” I said.

“I am just asking. But tell me: did you see your brother?” she said.

“Mami, I saw him.”

“When is he coming home?”

“He just said I should greet all of you,” I said.

“He just said you should greet us,” said my mother. There was a short silence before she spoke again. “Has he forgotten that he is your father’s successor? Has he forgotten that he is the one sitting on your father’s stool? Has he forgotten that he is the one to cover the roof of Tanju-Ngong’s household when there is rain? It is ten seasons past and my child has never come home even to greet his ancestors. Your brother said he was going to Ameleka to learn book then he will return to take care of the household your father left him with. He has never returned. Is this a good sign? The household is scattered and everyone is doing things his own way. Can any household stand without the man who was asked to speak with the ancestors on its behalf? Can a homestead stand together without a foundation and a roof? Does the bone no longer shield the marrow? He asked us to look for a wife for him. When will he be coming to take along his young wife? She has been very restless, wanting to meet her husband. Besides, my in-laws are thinking that we were not serious about the matter. We started paying the bride price. We have given colanuts for the girl and salt and the mother’s hoe. Anyileke’s father was here very early this morning having heard that you were in the country. He left without saying anything to you but I know he

has so many questions in his mind. He will be back tomorrow when there will be fewer people coming to greet you.” She was quiet for some time before she spoke again. “Your elder brother was presented as successor when your father died and everyone in the clan confirmed that a man knows how to choose his successor. Your brother had the proud image of his ancestors both in blood, in action and in spirit. But my son, I do not know what became of him since he went to the red man’s country. The whole *atsenandia* is wondering when he will deliver his own successor to continue with Tanju-Ngong’s lineage” she said.

“I talked with my brother and it appeared that he might never be able to come home to take his wife,” I said.

“Why, child? Do not shatter my heart,” she said with a gasp. A cold chill ran through my spine. I tried to hold myself and speak cautiously.

“From the way I saw him we might only pray for him and wish him good luck wherever he is.”

“Are you telling me that I will not see my child before I die?” asked my mother. I needed to be cautious here. The truth about my brother’s stay in the United States was such that I could not reveal the facts to my mother without caution. I needed to be careful the way I talked about it to her. I tried to soothe her by telling her that her son had a minor crisis but all would be well with time and he would be able to come home and visit her. After listening to me, she went to her house, staring on her footsteps and picking her path slowly and pensively as she walked. I knew the pains my mother was going through and the more I thought about it I felt pains myself. I could imagine her in her house brooding and asking herself questions. She understood that there was something really disturbing about my brother that I was hiding from her. And my brother himself had told me not to bother to tell anyone about how he lives in the United States. Was it any use going contrary to his words? I felt slightly dizzy and my eyes wet. I

went to my room and locked myself up, tried to sleep but sleep did not come.

Six

I felt uneasy, tossing about in bed like the drunken folk, trying to brush aside the fear that my mother's concern for my elder brother, might provoke fresh waves of illness in her. Between sleep and wake, reminiscences of the journey I made to the United States and the efforts I made to find him filled my mind.

My brother was the first person that came to my mind when I received news about my selection to participate in a States-Department-sponsored program in New York University. The joy of meeting an elder brother I had not seen for more than a decade brightened my day. It was at the notorious Melen food market near a road junction when my mobile phone rang persistently in my breast pocket. I put down the pineapple fruit I was pricing, removed the handset, quickly glanced at the monitor then held it to my ear. It was a fixed number used these days mainly in offices. I could not immediately decipher the person's voice.

"Hello," I said, my eyes dilated and my lips twitched now and then as my imagination stretched far and wide to different persons and regions.

"Hello!" replied a voice. "Is that Mr Kendem of the University of Yaounde?" The voice asked in a rather slow but reassuring and assertive tone.

"Yes sir," I replied, still struggling to imagine who could be calling and what the matter was.

"Okay," the voice continued, "this is Robert Challa of the Embassy of the United States in Yaounde."

"Oh yes, Mr Challa! How're you doing?" I asked. Challa was an official at the Cultural Affairs section of the US Embassy. I had met him a number of times especially when I was invited to participate in some events at the embassy.

"I'm doing fine," said Challa. There was a pause before he spoke again. "It's my pleasure to inform you that you have been finally selected by Washington to participate in the Fulbright Institute of American Civilization. You are requested to report at the Embassy on Tuesday for departure formalities...."

"The dream come true!" I screamed, shuffling forward and backward within the little space between the fruit stands. "The American dream come true!" Market men and women gazed at me wondering how a man could so suddenly become possessed.

I hurried out of the fruit market and stepped into the crowded traffic, almost hit by a taxi which was trying to escape the vigilance of the police on that Friday morning's hustle and tussle, forced my way through the congestion of the angry hooting vehicles and the sickening blasts of whistles by the policemen trying to put order on the traffic. I crossed to the mortuary of the *Centre Universitaire des Sciences de la Santé* and followed the quiet tarred road leading to the main campus of the university then to my office in the Department of English at the University of Yaounde where I worked as an instructor. I sat in the office and reflected over the exciting news. I had waited for the results for a long time after a pre-selection interview at the embassy and had long given up. There was a big surprise for me indeed. Beside the eagerness to meet my brother, I had always looked forward to the day I would travel to the United States to be part of the new world of great civilization, that great world of great diplomacy, technology and pop culture towards which every mind and heart turned. I had long wished to be part of that seductive and alluring world which was the source of much talk and excitement, a world which every Changeoh and Bekuiké did everything to go to. It was the land of hope into which millions of people had melted; a Promised Land into which millions of hapless souls had disappeared in search of salvation.

It had become the pride of every household or family to boast of a son or daughter working in the United States and from whom they expected huge turnovers of dollars and property. It was fashionable among the youth to talk about the different strategies of acquiring the visa, fashionable to talk about the triumphs and failures of the *doki*. And once the visa was issued big ceremonies were organized within family circles to celebrate it and the news easily spread to the neighborhoods and to families abroad. It had become a routine for parents to mortgage farms and houses to raise money to buy flight tickets. It had become prestigious for families to hire buses to accompany the heroes and heroines to the airports. Those who didn't have the authentic visa sneaked out of the country unnoticed. When they reached their destinations successfully they sent back words to tell the story of their triumphs.

Also, my senior colleagues at the university usually returned from the US where they attended conferences and other scientific and cultural missions, with marked changes in their bearing. They tussled gadgets around them: laptops slung over one shoulder, conference bags on the other, USB drives and walkman accessories hung on their necks in disarray like the disproportioned necklaces of the witchdoctor and a number of thick volume books held under their armpits in one hand, their accents slightly altered rightly or wrongly to the tone of American English. I had often watched these people with fascination. Many of them went and never returned and often called back home to talk about their new lucrative status in the Promised Land.

As I sat in the office poring over the great opportunity that lay before me, I thought God had answered my prayers. My path to the US was very smooth. I was going there as a guest of the Department of State. Above all, I was going to meet with sixteen other scholars from different parts of the world with whom we were to walk the great trail of American civilization with base at New York University. I tried to imagine what New York University looked like; a university at

the center of the universe. I imagined New York itself and saw a vast body of sophistication and modernity, which was millions of years away from the rustic and treacherous environment of my being.

It was this thought that brought my mind back to the realities of my office and the university environment. The stubborn leakage on the roof at the north end had formed wet green lines on the wall like the trails of a seasonal waterfall. I remembered that during an inspection tour of the department *Monsieur le Doyen* of the Faculty had taken note of the leakages and promised to give instructions for repairs to be done. That was a year before. It had never been repaired. And I knew that the amount of money spent to entertain his entourage after that tour could replace the whole roof. I looked at the cracks on the floor of the office possibly dug by the toes of a predecessor in some vigorous lust-cooling activity behind closed doors to conclude an academic deal. Some old chairs with broken limbs, an old bookshelf with some of the predecessor's *polycopies* and documents still stocked in them were the gawking occupants of the room. When I occupied the office two years before, I cleared off much of the stuff and dumped in an abandoned room attached to the faculty lounge. There was evidence that the furniture had never been replaced and the offices had never been renovated since that building was put up some forty years before.

The building was given a special design, of basic concreting called "English Building", isolated from the rest of the stone-walled buildings of the Faculty. As the founder and premier Head of the Department, Professor Mbasse Mbassa, told us when we were students, he had convinced the British to erect the building for the creation of a Department of English, to at least find some reason to justify the country's claim of bilingual nationhood. The building had since remained the only vestige of Anglophone's presence in the country's dusty experiment of bilingualism. According to Mbasse Mbassa, the initial faculty were British who were later replaced by a batch of students he

had sent to do the Master's degree in the University of Leeds. One could have seen some order and a sense of purpose in the way the department was built. But later the politics of federalism, of unitarism, of republicanism and national integration completely enveloped its objectives. The department and its intended open-air theatre which was near completion were abandoned and one of the Rectors of the university transformed the open-air theatre into a small palm plantation which now served as a good shade for students pressed with the need to ease themselves. The toilets had long broken down. And the external toilets which stood some distance away from the department, roughly built by one of the Rectors to serve the rising number of students or most possibly to justify the budget, had been seized by the natives. I remembered an Irish professor attending a conference in the department and who could not be shown a toilet when she badly needed one, complained that she had come to a country of constipated people. At the time, it seemed there was a curse in that university. It was when Madam Ligumba was appointed Rector that some sanity was brought into the place. She was indeed a hard lady, a principled lady, one of those few persons still living in the country who could twist the maniacal urge for self-interest to the advantage of the public, one of those few women who could bathe in the same stream with men.

The country as a whole had for long cast clouds of uncertainty over its horizons. Leadership wore gold-rimmed lenses but could not see beyond its nostrils, grossly overwhelmed by personal insatiable desires and soulless passions. This was a country blessed with nature's generosity. This was a country in which milk and honey overflowed the banks of the imagination. But this was a country drenched in a general feeling of revulsion for decades. Squalor filled every nook and cranny with decades of looting and plundering of the state's treasury. The republic was crumbling and the future was bleak. And millions of people, especially the young people who called themselves the bushfallers were fleeing from the country

into oblivion, fleeing into the wilderness in search of life. And those whose fates couldn't escape the *kakamba* simply comforted themselves with words that had become the national slogan for surrender – *le monde est formidable vivons seulement...*

There was a nasty taste in my mouth and I felt sorry for myself and the universe which I inhabited. Then the craving to depart possessed my mind. I too had to disappear into the wilderness like the millions of others that had gone before me. I too had to become a “bushfaller”, disappear to that country in which there was life and joy everywhere. I remembered the old primary school song:

There's life and joy over there

Over there

There's life and joy over there

Over there

There's life and joy over there

Over there, over there, over there.

I sang the song in my mind, and later I could hear myself humming it aloud.

At last I was going to meet my brother after a long, long time. He had informed me in his last email that he was currently living in New York, just where I was going to. My brother was one of those early bushfallers who had fled the country when life was becoming stiff. It was in the early nineties when compatriots were faced with a triple tragedy: double salary reduction, devaluation of the currency and unemployment. He left the country after obtaining a bachelor's degree with the intension of furthering his studies in the US. The economic crises and political manoeuvres had brought compatriots down on their knees and the future looked very faint. Family problems swelled. My brother believed like many of his compatriots, that bushfalling was the only other alternative. While in the US, he often wrote to me to say he

was doing well and each year he promised coming home for Christmas. He had never come. He had told me he had succeeded in securing citizenship, bought a house and I could figure him going about in confidence. For once a thought crossed my mind. If things worked out well I could.... One of the first things I thought I could do would be to inform him about my visit to the US. I was sure my brother was going to be very happy to receive me.

On Tuesday, I went for the briefing on departure formalities. At the US embassy, I went through the security checks and when I looked into the building it was as if I had arrived at my destination already. I had visited the US Embassy several times even after it was moved from the congested temporary office at the center of the city to its new permanent site. It was one of those imposing structures on the earth of Africa, vast and superbly planned ultra-modern architecture. Its green lawns, broad concrete lanes and the articulate finishing quite contrasted with the cracked rusty motorways and the muddy smear of much of the city.

In the heart of the main building, three other persons – two ladies and a gentleman already at the lobby were also on appointment. From casual exchanges I understood that they too were going to the US for different programs. Mr Challa came into the lobby at exactly 10 a.m. and ushered us into a room where two ladies were waiting. The briefing lasted for roughly thirty minutes after which we were handed travel documents and visa application forms. We were to report to the consular office on Thursday for visa formalities. While the others left I was asked to stay for a while and receive my flight ticket.

“Mr Kendem, enjoy your stay in the US,” said one of the ladies handing me the ticket. She was a stately lady with bulky plaits and a clear articulate voice. “We hope you’ll return after your program.” I was caught up in a situation I could not explain. I could neither say “Yes” nor “No” and stood staring at her searching for the word.

“Please, don’t disappoint us,” she pleaded smiling and leading me towards the lobby. As I walked out of the building I could not understand why there was that emphasis on my having to return. I wondered what made the lady make this special appeal to me. Did she read my mind? Did they have the mind-detecting software at the embassy? Or did she overhear my conversation with friends and relations who had cautioned me not to make the mistake of returning to the country? They had told me that all I needed was a visa to travel to the world of marvel and the visa was to be issued at the request of the embassy unlike the thousands others that crowded the consular office daily to be issued that most cherished document.

And truly, there was a crowd of anxious people at the consular office when I arrived on Thursday morning. I had left my bed, as I thought, very early to arrive before anyone else. But I was shocked to find such a crowd. Were Cameroonians no longer asleep? Was the whole country out that early morning knocking at the door of the US Embassy to be rescued from the rising floods of hardship? It reminded me of the Christian story of the Judgment Day, the crowds of souls that shall gather at the gate of heaven on the last day waiting for admission into heaven or hell. I went through the security check into a large opening that separated the security gate and the main building. It was in this large space that the crowd stood or sat quietly beaming with hope. I passed through the crowd, went to the security guard at the door of the main building and presented my documents. My visa application form had been filled and signed by Embassy officials and I was not going through the complicated process like other applicants. He let me in and I was shocked at the number of people already in the hall, almost the same crowd as the one in the open space outdoors. I submitted my documents, did the finger prints and was asked to return the following day in the afternoon to collect the visa. I was back right in time the following day to collect it. It was a J1 visa and attached to the

passport was the Certificate of Eligibility for Exchange Visitor (J1) Status issued by the US Department of State.

I thumbed through the leaves of the passport and found the visa page. My eyes stared blankly at the grey-blue-colored piece of paper glued to one of the pages and I could discern my photograph first and then the word “visa” written in big grey prints on the top middle of the page with other details written in small prints. I held the passport in my hands like a piece of precious gold, like a tray of fresh eggs, looked up towards heaven and heard my mind saying “Thank You, God”, unaware that the security guard had opened the door and was waiting for me to step out and give room to the other aspirants. I left the hall and came out into the street and walked with uncertain steps at first and then my feet became lighter. I could fly. I thought I had wings already. The horizon opened its mantle and I could see vast regions of brightness. I could see the limitless realm of the universe unhindered by the gates and the barriers and the walls into which I could fly.

The first thing I did when I reached home was to send an email to my brother to inform him about my itinerary. I received his reply a few days later expressing a lot of joy that I was coming to meet him in New York. In his previous mails he had told me that he was a very progressive businessman, a real estate manager, and did not see any reason to continue school as was his initial idea before he left the country. He said he was married to a white girl, had bought an apartment and was looking forward to coming home to start a lucrative business. That way, he said, it was going to be easier for him to shuffle between the US and Cameroon. That was long ago. When my mother became seriously ill everyone expected him to come before her death. He sent word that his passport was missing and that as soon as he had a new passport he would be coming. When he heard that my mother had recovered he still promised to come and visit her. Even then, he was thinking of divorcing with his white wife with whom he had contracted a marriage to obtain a green card. And that my mother and I should look for

a beautiful girl of tribal origin for him. My mother was excited about it and had negotiated for a young wife with the dexterity of age and experience. I was certain that with my going to the US, my brother was going to hasten the emigration process for his new wife. Before my departure, the email exchange between me and my brother was frequent. He sent his telephone number with which I was going to reach him as soon as I arrived in the US.

I could not say if I slept that night at all. I had reveries, dreams of vast complex places and crowds, of airports in Europe and America, of planes fleeing through the sky and a whole lot of complex issues against the background of the elementary school song:

There's life and joy over there

Over there

There's life and joy over there

Over there

There's life and joy over there

Over there, over there, over there.

Seven

Days before my departure, I was filled with excitement, yet time moved so slowly that I feared fate would change its mind against me. The day did come when in the first week of June, I left Cameroon. I was accompanied to the Nsimalen Airport by my friend Zengu, my two sisters, Acha and Ajong and a nephew, Ngo. They all sent hearty greetings to my brother and expressed the wish that he could visit them some day.

I boarded the plane to Brussels and the following day a connecting flight to New York. Eight hours boeing through the open sky from Brussels, a confident voice announced: "We will be making our decent into JFK International Airport in approximately twenty minutes. Please, fasten your seat belts making sure your trays are folded and your seats in upright position. Please, keep your seat belts fastened until we are safely in the boarding zone. Thank you for flying with Delta Airlines." The announcement made, the plane began to tilt slightly to the left, balanced itself again and a slow steady decent followed. Gradually everything began to come into view. At first the ground looked like square plots on a vast terrain then suddenly the highways appeared, looking like black ribbons with cars as small as beetles heading up and down the highways. I could see the clear demarcation between the city's mainland and the sea. Nearer the ground, the buildings became more and more visible. Towers emerged sporadically from lush green parks with elegant trees shooting skyward. It was as if nature continued to resist the encroachment of civilizations; and nature and industrialization cohabited with so much ease. A sudden grating noise and the landing gear was released. I jumped slightly at the sound and feeling my ears pop, I opened my mouth to release pressure. Trees and tower tops whizzed

by and the plane landed with a bump and made its way on the runway to the arrival gate.

There were massive crowds at the airport. Passengers transiting turned to a different direction; those that had arrived at their destination quickly queued up in front of the different desks waiting to go through the security checks and the customs. I was bracing for long lines but to my greatest amazement the immigration lines were so fast in baggage and security checks. The friendly and helpful immigration officers shuffled passengers through in a very efficient manner. When it came to my turn the immigration officer opened and read the letter the consular office in Yaounde had attached to my passport, stamped the passport and handed it to me.

“Enjoy your stay in the United States, sir”, he said.

“Thank you, sir,” I said imitating his sharp smart tone. I wasted little time at the baggage claim and at the customs, followed the exit signs and arrived in an open hall which led to the city. There were a number of desks occupied by people working for the taxi and shuttle services. I followed the directives given by the program officials and boarded a shuttle. I was eager to savor the glory of New York at first sight, stretching my neck time and again to see the tops of the skyscrapers often without success. I marveled at the masterpieces of architectural and industrial designs and wondered where the builders stood before accomplishing their tasks.

The shuttle took close to an hour to arrive at the Palladium at New York University where I was to be lodged. The Palladium was a giant residential block belonging to New York University. Two young ladies at the lobby identified and welcomed me in a very friendly and polite manner, then guided me through the signing of documents, led me to my apartment and explained a number of things to me. When they left me to my own devices, I found great pleasure trying to acquaint myself with the new environment. I stood at the window on the fifth floor and scrupulously screened the marvel of that

part of the city, the extra-modern architecture, elegant monuments and portraits of historic figures, lush green parks spread out in decent array between monuments and the buildings, clean sidewalks with easy access for those on automated wheelchairs, sidewalks broad enough to be motorways, expansive streets stretched out of view, sky-piercing towers rose here and there. Close to the peak of the triple triangular face of the tower were giant clocks. It was already 7.30 P.M. and the rays of the sun were still very strong. The day was still very clear whereas in Cameroon early bed goers were already yawning and yearning for sleep. I checked my watch to be sure that the clock was correct. I had corrected the time in the plane when it was announced that the time zone had changed. Since then I had verified with every clock I saw to be sure I was moving with the right time. At first I could not understand. It was possibly another scientific invention to make the days longer than the nights.

I went downstairs and strolled around the Palladium. There were fewer people in the lobby than when I had arrived. Or I possibly never took note of the crowd. The two ladies were still there sitting beside a small table. They smiled as I stepped out, deciding not to go far lest I should get lost in that vastness of sophistication. Besides, the view of the city was not as enchanting as that from the window of my apartment on the fifth floor. I went back to my apartment and occupied myself with mastering the facilities. But there wasn't much in there to keep me busy. I felt lonely then decided to take another short walk round the block to see if I could find a telephone facility to reach my brother, hoping to fall into his welcoming hands before nightfall. It wasn't as easy as I thought. A campus police offered me his cell phone and guided me how to dial the number. I tried several times and the number didn't go through. I went round the building to see which restaurants, grocery stores and shops were available to find something to eat. I was hungry but I was cautious not to betray my ignorance on how to go about with things in my new environment. By

nightfall I had gone up and down in the elevator at least ten times before going to sleep.

The following day was Sunday. When I got up in the morning I wanted to go to church. I went downstairs and asked the campus police on duty at the lobby of the Palladium where the nearest Catholic Church was located. No one had a clear idea. One of them quickly consulted the google map on his laptop and read out the directions to me as to someone who had spent a life time in the United States. I gave up and went back to my apartment and tried to occupy myself with reading, waiting for the afternoon when we were led by a guide round Greenwich Village and introduced to the buildings of New York University. Many of the university buildings could be identified in the crowded Greenwich Village from the purple flags that hung at the crest of their buildings' towers.

The tour of the university structures lasted two hours and we had enough time after that to look around before departure in the late afternoon to the concert of country-punk flavored rock songs around the Washington Square Park. Because I could not easily be directed to a Catholic Church around, I planned to go to church the following Sunday morning hoping that we would be free. I needed to feed my soul with prayers; I yearned to worship in a foreign church where Christianity was at its best expression. I believed I was going to meet with the essential sacrament uncontaminated with fossilized cultural constraints that kept Africa always backwards in terms of development. I looked forward to the next Sunday so that I could fill the spiritual vacuum in my heart. I made the sign of the cross inwardly and started tracing my way back to the Palladium until the flag was in view. I stood around the entrance of the Palladium and watched the street swell with people, watched students move in and out of the Palladium late into the evening.

The following morning, I left the Palladium to the conference Room of the Steinhardt School of Education where the multinationals assembled. The staff was introduced

beginning with the Director of the Program for International Education. His name was Bill Host. His assistants, three young ladies, two of whom had welcomed us on arrival were also introduced. They were Meiriv, Shizuka and Alejandra. Meiriv was an Israeli-American, a stern-looking, practical lady of about twenty six, had little time to waste. She was the director's immediate assistant and she gave instructions most of the time. Shizuka, a Japanese-American, had little twinkling eyes, slightly bulky but very agile, had a melodious voice and a playful gusto. And Alejandra, a Mexican-American, was always full of smiles, a cheerful and patient young lady with a keen interest on giving details. It was fashionable for everyone to attach an origin to his or her Americanism – Irish-American, Chinese-American, Indian-American, Arab-American, African American.... I smiled at this interesting way of defining the self. Every person wanted to be American but no one wanted to relinquish his or her origin. At that moment I was not yet African-American or Cameroonian-American, I was still African Cameroonian.

The group of seventeen scholars representing the major continents of the world introduced themselves: three Africans including myself from Central Africa, Tugu from West Africa, and Tunis-Aziz, a light-skinned fellow from North Africa who could easily pass for a European. He was an open-minded and excited fellow. Four came from Europe including Frances, a lady of about thirty-five with delicate soft-spoken airs and deliberate politeness which assorted elegantly with her careful choice of words. Tugu and I met her that morning on our way to the conference room. We had walked a short distance with her conversing in French before separating. Of course, she had quickly identified Tugu and me as coming from French colonies. And she talked with the airs of the granddaughter of the colonizer and Tugu and I listened to her as the offspring of the victims of French colonization. I observed that she was cautiously friendly and slightly intolerant.

"Comment t'aller vous?" she had asked in French after I had introduced myself.

“Je t’aller bien,” I said. She smudged her face with wrinkles, like one who had swallowed a bitter pill. Tugu on his part, opened his so eyes widely, apparently appalled that I could speak French fluently being an Anglophone from a French colony.

“Tu parles très bien Française, eh,” said Frances issuing a casual smile then resuming her airs, this time, visibly acidic airs.

“Merci beaucoup,” I said enlivening my ego since I could then speak French in New York uncensored. Frances twisted her lips sourly and her nose looked stiffer. She walked with another European lady called Grisse, who even in the conference room that morning had hardly said a word. She looked snobbish and reserved. The other European lady, Terkiyana, cared so much about smoking a cigarette than anything else in Christendom. She seized every opportunity that morning to sneak away to smoke a cigarette. Russio was from Eurasia, a tall slender gentleman who was quiet for most of the time.

There were two others from the Middle East: Joda, an outspoken fellow and Lebanajjar who looked muscular, and talked with a robust, domineering and confident voice. He gave the impression that he was a very fulfilled and enlightened academic, talked about his academic exploits but said he was still writing his first book, a masterpiece which he said would be published soon. Several others came from the Asian continent including Bangla, Pakista, Kora, Cyna, Indira and others. From the American continent there was a tiny lady, Kanadia with little dim searching eyes which she occasionally brought down whenever I had eye contact with her. She sat in the chair like a cat; her little trunk leaned over her legs which folded into herself, her eyes roamed from one male participant to the other, occasionally fixing their gaze on the more hefty ones. There was Brisilo-dos-Santos from South America, a slender fellow with girly gestures and a high pitch. He announced that he was the youngest in the group and that he was writing a ground-breaking book titled “American Dreams

and Nightmares”. Most of the time thereafter we called him simply Dos Santos. There was Chilia from South America, a young white-skinned lady with oval hips and a soft-rounded chest, who talked very little. She sat near Russio and although coming from different destinations, caressed him as if they had known each other from childhood. Their sitting posture and the gold-wrought rings fixed on their fourth fingers gave the impression that they were engaged immediately they arrived in the United States or were visiting the United States for a honeymoon.

On this first day of our meeting, Bill Host, the director of the program, an elderly, curious-looking person with a persistent half smile, underlined the main theme of the program and the assumption that triggered it. He went on to talk about the US as an example of a fairly successful attempt at reconciling diversity with national unity, stressing on social equality, cultural diversity, a fluid superstructure, social mobility and religious toleration as the fundamental pillars of American civilization.... He then officially launched the group on the great trail of American civilization with a sumptuous lunch on the ground floor of the Steinhardt School of Education, the trail which was to begin with a tour of the central part of Manhattan that afternoon.

I was conscious of my limitations. I was aware that I was moving with a varied group of people most of whom had been exposed to civilization from birth; people who had been exposed to decent lifestyles, exposed to cultural, economic and technological advancement that distinguished between the highest world and the lowest world. And I tried to exercise caution and respect in whatever I said and did. I understood that the rest of the group was observing Tugu and me with curiosity hoping to find stereotypical evidence to feed their prejudices about people from our part of the world. As I talked about my professional status, institutional affiliation and my publications I wondered whether I made any sense at all especially with the sour looks I could discern on the faces of

some of the participants. Lebanajjar laughed grumpily, sat back in his chair and stared at me with a sour expression. I rounded off with the introduction of myself to avoid any embarrassment. Tugu sat near me seeming to have sensed the atmosphere and was very brief when his turn came. I was not comfortable with his introduction either. It was to make the others feel that those of us from Africa had nothing to offer while others told lengthy stories about themselves, the pride of their country and the high rating of the universities in which they were professors.

At the end of the session we went to the Palladium to prepare for the afternoon tour. The trip to Central Manhattan was scheduled at 2 P.M. Before the scheduled time, I took the elevator down to the lobby of the Palladium to avoid being a victim of polite cynicism which I noticed within the short time I spent with the group. More than half of the group was already gathered and my wish was also to meet someone who could help me trace my brother. I had sent him an email and he had not replied. I tried calling again but the phone wasn't going through. The guide who was to take us round had already arrived. She was a smart elderly lady who gave us a brief itinerary of the tour of Central Manhattan. She assisted us with the purchase of subway tickets and when the rest of the pilgrims came, she distributed them and took the lead, moving with short quick strides like a fairy. At Union Square not far from the Palladium she led us into the subway. It was amazing to find people going in and out of the place like termites. The subway was a world of its own. One would hardly have known that there were such crowds underground. We boarded one of the numerous trains that glided in and out of that underground station.

We alighted from the train at East 42nd Street at Park Avenue, in Midtown Manhattan. This was the Grand Central terminal, a monumental railway station. Here was a world of its own underground, very much busy like the world I had seen at the J.F.K. Kennedy Airport when I first arrived the United

States, where planes flew in the skies like flocks of migrating birds and inside the airport building there was a constantly moving crowd as though the people of the world were coming together for a feast in the United States. We went up several flights of stairs towards the main concourse and for much of the time I didn't listen to the guide's narratives. I observed every detail of construction, a monstrous cavity in the womb of the earth linked by a complicated network of steel, of interminable chains and tracts of rails, with trains rushing to and fro on different platforms while the crowds hurried in and out to and from different destinations. At the main concourse, a bustling crowd of people – pink, red, brown, black – streamed in and out of restaurants, fast food kiosks, delicacies and bakery shops, newsstands, stores, ticket counters and information booths. The arches and pillars defined by marble and stone were studiously guarded by a large flag of the United States of America which hung from the immense oval ceiling. The flag's horizontal and alternating red and white stripes and the multitude of logically arranged white stars on a blue background in the canton reassured every traveler of the grandeur of the soil on which she or he trod.

We came out of the main concourse at Park Avenue. The façade of the railway station on the 42nd Street was constructed with large arches of true beaux arts design on the top of which were sculptures of Greek gods. In this part of Manhattan, buildings sprang up in towering contest for the sky. Skyscrapers and residential towers expanded vertically. There were imposing towers built in a wide variety of styles, some with gothic peculiarities, and others with conical and steel spire tops, bronze toned beams. I saw skyscrapers with magnificent art design and unique ornamentation; skyscrapers with a rich variety of texture and context....

"Ken, what're you doing? We're leaving you behind!" came the voice of Pakista, an Asian who had been very friendly and trying to know much about my country. I hurried through the crowd of people to join the group that had gone a little

distance ahead. We went through strategic parts of Midtown Manhattan, through the Rockefeller Center with its Prometheus gold statue, the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building with their majestic pointed spires and a series of other tall buildings which led us to Times Square. I had often heard that Time Square was the busiest street in the world. I could now see it in stark reality. At Times Square the population was dense, people moved like sea waves, in a flurry of a less violent hurricane. The chaos of hundreds of advertisements screaming out persistently, the concentration of illuminated billboards, news crawlers, and jumbo screens produced a wild but attractive scenario in a bid to conquer the commercial universe.

At nightfall, we returned to the Palladium. I was too tired to eat dinner and when I lay in bed my mind was filled with urban sophistication, with towers rising into the sky. I wondered at the marvel of America, the images of crowds forever hurrying to different destinations, sky-piercing architecture, and the marvel of the underground train station.... The subways... This was indeed the capital of modern civilization. The air filled with wonder! The ground filled with wonder! The underground filled with wonder! I could now understand why there was that crowd out there in my country knocking at the doors of the US embassy for visas. It was here, in New York, that God seemed to have created his model of an earthly paradise after the old civilizations had failed him; the old civilizations which had betrayed God's plans for the world by creating more death than life. And God said: "All ye children of the earth who have been persecuted because of your faith in me, all ye who suffer from oppression because of the color of your skin, class, or sex.... You shall find here in America, in this earthly Paradise, peace and respite, hope and glory; you shall find here a place where you shall thrive by your talent and not by the color of your skin, sex or religion. For, in every man and woman I created something unique and valuable which if all were combined without discrimination will

create a world of your dreams. Come ye children, and with your own sweat accompany me in the creation of this great design in which you shall forever live to be free and happy....”

Eight

The night was a long one, filled with dreams in which we toured Midtown Manhattan. This time it was not the lady guide who took us round. It was my brother. He had taken me to some of the most beautiful and sophisticated places in New York and we had walked round the city the whole night and day. The telephone rang. I stretched my hand, took the receiver and hooked to my ear. It was Joda. He was already waiting for me at the lobby. He called again shortly after to say he was moving ahead. Tugu too called to announce that he was on his way to the Conference Room.

I got out of the bed, stretched myself and grunted, and my mind went back to the dream. The image of my brother came fully alive to my mind and my eagerness to meet him stood foremost. Joda had promised to help me out in the search. I went to the window, pulled up the curtain and looked at the clock on the tower opposite the street. It was 7.50 a.m. I was already ten minutes late. I took a bath, dressed up and raced through the streets towards the conference hall. Downstairs in the hall of the Steinhardt School of Education, I flashed my card at the campus police and slipped into the elevator. One member of the group was just entering and we both alighted at the third floor where the Conference Room was located. Bill Host and his assistants and the rest of the group were already seated. Mike Parra, the main speaker that morning, stood at a table waiting for a few housekeeping issues to be settled. That done, he asked the pilgrims to introduce themselves. Then he started his lecture on the “Transit of Civilisations” in which he traced the Puritan origins as the foundation of the United States. When he finished, I had a couple of questions to ask. I put up my hand to speak.

“Yes sir”, said Mike Parra ushering me on.

“Thank you, Mike,” I said, “This has been a very fascinating lecture. I have a better understanding of the factors that contributed to American civilization. Civilizations come and some last for a very short time. What is the secret behind America’s success as the world’s leading civilization for so many years and what measures are being taken to sustain her position as the most powerful and most successful nation on earth?”

“Great question,” said Mike Parra, then he went ahead to explain a number of factors which guaranteed America’s leadership in modern civilization. After the question and answer session Mike Parra found an opportunity to discuss with me.

“You’re from Cameroon, you said?” he asked offering me a handshake.

“Yes sir,” I replied.

“Your ideas are quite interesting. Have you been teaching at the University for long?” he asked.

“Not for so long. Say two years”, I said.

“That’s not very long. Are you published?” he asked.

“Yes sir, a couple of things,” I said.

“Great. Did you bring some with you? I’ll like to read some,” said Mike Parra offering me another handshake.

“It will be my pleasure, sir,” but I don’t have them here. I’ll bring them tomorrow and leave with Bill,” I said releasing my hand from his grip. While Mike Parra turned to talk with Bill Host who had been listening keenly to our conversation, I moved towards the hallway to have coffee. Lebanajjar was conversing with Dos Santos as I entered the hallway. Lebanajjar gave me a long piercing look from toe to head, while Dos Santos folded his arms, stood stiff, turned his head and pored at me with the tails of his eyes. I dreaded their looks, trying as much as possible not to say or do anything that would hurt anyone. They certainly were not happy with me for some crime I was not aware of. Maybe they didn’t like my color. I felt sorry for my country, for Africa and for black people. My

only acquaintances in the group were Pakista who always sat near me because we exchanged a lot of ideas; there was Joda, Tunis-Aziz and Tugu. In some cases, I felt freer with the women from South Asia including Kora, Cyna, and Viyena.

The day before the second Sunday of our stay in New York I asked some of my acquaintances if anyone was interested in accompanying me to church the following day. Some of them looked at me as if I had lost my senses. Others planned instead to attend a concert, film or opera show. Joda was a Muslim although I had not seen him pray often as it was the case with those of that religion back in my country. Neither did I hear him talking of going to a mosque. Tugu had planned to meet a relative resident in New York that morning. The relative had insisted that they could only meet on that day because he was leaving New York for a couple of months. I got the information from our guide who searched on the internet to describe the nearest church to me.

In the evening, I put together my prayer books, took my sodden King James' version of the Holy Bible which was offered to me by the Reverend Father Stumpel while I was a student in Seat of Wisdom College, thumped it reverently, read a few pages and put near the prayer books. I took my rosary, knelt near my bed and said my evening prayers. I prayed for my mother and asked God to guide me to find my brother as soon as possible. I had found out where the closest Catholic Church, The Church of St. Joseph, was located and planned to leave very early to the church so that I could have a comfortable seat. I could imagine a giant building with a big open and vast hall filled with Christians sitting on pews right up to the second or third floor and the tower rising above every building in the neighborhood. And by the time I went to bed I was filled with great desire, to be part of a congregation of those who knew God better, who understood the language of God and could implement every detail of His design on earth.

Following the regular schedule, the morning mass was to start at 9 a.m. and by 8.30 a.m. I was already in the elevator

going downstairs to start trekking to the Church of St. Joseph. Most churches in Cameroon were always crowded by the time the procession to the altar began and I expected that in this part of the world's biggest and brashest city the Church of St. Joseph would be so full that one would hardly find a gap at the door to peep at the pulpit. The streets were less congested and most of the stores and shops were closed and I guessed that most people had gone to church already. I walked down the street using strategic buildings as landmarks, walked past the chains of buildings until at about 8.50 a.m. I found myself in front of the Church of St. Joseph near Washington Place at 365 Sixth Avenue otherwise called the Avenue of the Americas. This was in the neighborhood of Manhattan. It was a lovely old-fashion church from its exterior view and I could see that some activities were still going on around the building. There were very few people in the church by the time I got there. I feared that I had missed the time until I read the mass schedules on the information board. Inside the church, I went to a far end where I would not be of any embarrassment to anyone. It was when the priest and the altar servers led the procession to the altar that I was convinced that the service had actually begun.

The interior of the church was superbly decorated with beautiful flowers and tall candles against its cream white background. A large brown painting hung on the rear wall suggestive of desert land with extensive spread of sand and rock. On the foreground of the frontispiece hung dusty clouds above the dry earth. The background assorted with the series of pillars on the left flank of the church leaving the impression of splendid colonial architecture. There was another painting on the right flank, a mural that looked like the transfiguration of Christ and some apostles or prophet I could not immediately decipher. It was a simple and lovely building that could serve as a venue for quiet repose in that busy neighborhood of Manhattan. Several rows of glossy wooden pews formed the basic furniture of the church hall, most of the

seats hoping and earnestly waiting for the faithful to occupy them.

The mass was solemnized with excellent acoustics of an orchestra complemented with a choral which sang in refined angelic voices. The conductor stood on the dais with equally cream-white coloring and performed like one executing a special angelic mission. His eyes closed and his lips moved with the taste of sour delight, he tilted his head slightly to the right as if to listen to his own glorious instructions, while his left hand raised slightly above his shoulder and the fingers spread out cautiously, a baton tapered to a comfortable grip at the tips of his right thumb and his first two fingers. He made swift stiff gyrating gestures with the baton, conducting with the perfection of a high profile performer, his gesture accorded articulately with the rhythm of the music.

The congregants, mostly aged persons, listened to the thought-provoking sermon of the priest with rapturous attention. The priest talked particularly about the divergence in Christ's ministry and condemned Christians who were turning away from the church to engage in occultic practices, others moving away to create smaller groups which they could manage for their own selfish ends, many who yet do not see the need for Christian life, many who came to church only when there was a crisis....

"Church attendance spiked a few weeks after Nine Eleven because we felt somewhat insecure," he said. "For a few weeks people saw a continual need for prayer, a need for God. Fear and insecurity made us to think about the existence of God. We never believed this could happen because we rely faithfully on an efficient government. And our creed is the constitution. This church was full after Nine Eleven. But this was just for a short while and church attendance declined because we felt comfortable security thereafter. We were again in control. Big government, science and technology were in control. And there was little need for God. Perhaps we are waiting for another Nine Eleven to find another salvation in Christ. Perhaps when

our prosperity and security fail we will have another chance to know God, to see Christ as the way and the truth and the life. Jesus says in John 14:6 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' So what are we doing to use Jesus as the way towards salvation? It's by reading the Bible and knowing what Truth is, what sin is and what holiness is. Instead, Americans have gathered round self-made ministers and preachers who tell them just what they would like to hear and not the Truth, not about sin or holiness, or about God's judgment...."

It was a penetrating sermon. I could see the frantic obsession in a church minister resolved to rescue the souls of his congregants, to hold back his communicants from stepping away into the disjointed world, to see Truth in that God and only God alone could guarantee peace and security in the world, the peace and security which the world very much needed. I longed to visit the World Trade Center to see the terrifying scars of evil forces. The tour of the Financial District and the World Trade Center were among the localities we were to visit in New York but it was slated for a later date. I longed to see the blemishes of the monstrous acts of the human mind.

After the mass service, I made some desperate effort to find information about my brother. I could not explain the reason for the sudden black-out between the two of us. Electronic mails had become the most effective method of reaching any person in any part of the world. But there again, I lost contact. Looking for him as we went through the various facades of American civilization was like looking for a pin in the wilderness. How could anyone meet another in a sea of people without a specific appointment? Coincidence. I relied on coincidence, on strength of blood relationships that could bring us together. The call of blood could bring us together even in a foreign land. I did not give up hope. I peeped into every nook in search of a black man; I filtered the crowds with curious scrutiny and most often lost trend when I moved about with the rest of the pilgrims. The trip to New England which

was scheduled to begin on Friday of our second week of stay in New York University could be another opportunity to find information concerning his whereabouts.

Thursday afternoon, the day before the journey began, was declared free so that the pilgrims could prepare for the trip. I visited the shops to pick up a few items which I needed for the journey. Also in the back of my mind was the wish to stumble on any Cameroonian or most particularly my brother. I had been in contact with an in-law in Maryland and tried to find out if she ever heard about him. She said she saw him many years ago and later came to understand that he was always moving from one state to the other because he was always involved in one little problem or the other. But she was not sure in which state he was at the moment. One little problem or the other! That was a little more serious than I had expected. In fact, I never really expected him to be in problems from what he always told me. Could my in-law be mistaking him for a different person? From the previous contacts with my brother I understood that he was well to do. That was the reason he was inviting me to stay on after the program. Besides, my brother was a trustful, calm and responsible person. I couldn't imagine him involved in a crime. My in-law was certainly speaking of another person. She called a few days later to say she had information that he was in New York but she did not exactly know the neighborhood and promised to find more information about him.

I was somehow relieved when I received this bit of information. At least, there was some hope of meeting my brother. I was sure there was a network of Cameroonian Americans in the US. Through any of them I could get information that could help to trace my brother. I had tried calling him ever since I arrived in New York but the call wouldn't go through. It could be I copied the wrong number. I had consulted the mail he sent to me several times and found that the number was the same. It was possible that my brother had made the error himself. I had sent him another email

before that afternoon but received out-of-office auto-reply. The message read simply that he would be absent from the office till a later date. And the later date I could not tell. By that Thursday, I gave up sending mails and trying to call. I had to try different strategies. And the immediate strategy was rather of an unconscious kind. I tended to look critically at every black face I saw hoping that by some magic I could accidentally stumble on him. I laughed at myself for this terrible imagination. It was like looking for a needle in the Sahara, a needle that was lost in the sands of the desert more than ten years ago.

I moved from shop to shop, from supermarket to supermarket but I could never go through the interminable line of shops and supermarkets. Most of the blacks I saw in the shops or supermarkets were security guards, standing stiff and unruffled at distinct areas of the shops looking around for hours. Most of them wore earrings and plaited their hair; some with fully mature dreadlocks stood for hours casting sour looks as if they found themselves in prisons without walls; as if they were subjected to some permanent *wahala*; as if a smile was an unaffordable luxury.

Out of the shops, some of the blacks I saw wore colossal baggy shorts stretching down to the shins like sacks under monster T-shirts with weird designs, frightful dreadlocks, some wore multiple earrings. Both blacks and whites wanted to be exceptional in dressing, each wanted to assert a personality summoned up by some internal or profound personal ego. As I went back to the Palladium the strange dressing habits of individuals became more frequent from the crowds I met on my way. How did it come that I was seeing much of it only that day? Had I been so blind to many issues since my arrival? But I was awed by the way the boys and the girls and sometimes elderly men and women dressed. The boys wore baggy jean shorts, or tight jean trousers that showed the projection of all the elements of their muscles, and sometimes sleeveless T-shirts. Some of the boys had no shirts on. They wore baggy

grimy jeans trousers leaving the upper trunk bare, except at times with wild tattoos marks on the arms, backs and chests. The girls wore mostly short jean skirts that had been carelessly or carefully trimmed at the bottom, skirts not larger than big handkerchiefs stretched stiffly to the edge of their buttocks, with loose threads hanging on glowing laps. And it was great artistic display in the wearing of those kinds of skirts – walking, entering a car, sitting on a chair and crossing the legs, stooping to pick up a fallen coin was a skilful postmodern art. And the girls performed the fits with great dexterity. Some of their blouses, mostly halfshirts and crop tops ended just below the breast and the bellies and backs were exposed. I watched them tongue-tied, as they moved about expressing rights and freedoms. I watched the exotic fruits in their bloom daring not to look at anyone directly in the eyes for fear of being arraigned on charges of violating individual space, arraigned for sexual harassment. That was America. And America was the law. I pondered at the eagerness with which men and women wanted to move naked. I had noticed this growing tendency also in my country. The girls in my country were virtually going naked. I believed that if an international convention was not signed before the end of the decade permitting men and women to walk naked the world should be ready to face another form of terrorism.

And of course, there was the modern culture of tattooing and body piercing. It terrified me to see young people and even some elderly people mutilate themselves with knives and blades and other piercing objects. They wore rings on their ears, cheeks, nostrils, eyelids, eyebrows, lips, tongues, navels and other sacred parts of their body which even harmful objects dread. The boys and the girls engraved tattoos on the arms, chests, backs and below the navel. While some men completely mutilated their heads and faces with cuttings of some mystical tattoo designs, what was most popular among young women was the lower back tattoos displayed in erotic dressing like halfshirts, bellyshirts or crop tops, and low-rise jeans worn

around the hips. That was the individual's body. And the individual had the right to freedom of expression. He or she had the right to mutilate it in every cherished manner. I stretched my imagination to understand the meaning of this popular culture. There was something buried in the substratum of being which found expression only by those acts, some internal wound that pushed the individual to create the scars on the external flesh, some untold mystery about the individual's being which he or she had carried alone, along with the floods of people but with no one stopping to say "Hi, how're you doing?". What a marvelous world!

Our trip to New England was just hours away and I went back to the Palladium to put my baggage together.

Nine

As early as 7 a.m. Bill Host's assistants arrived in three different minivans and parked them in front of the Palladium.

"Hey y' guys, hurry up," rang Meiriv's soft vibrant voice as if in a chant. "Our journey begins at exactly 7.30. Six persons per van." she instructed. I wanted to ride in Meiriv's van but Lebanajjar and Dos Santos had already boarded it, Kanadia sitting very close to Lebanajjar on one side and Dos Santos on the other while Lebanajjar imposed a domineering ego sitting between both, his arms thrown round the shoulders of the two others. I felt an awkward sentiment and withdrew. Shizuka would have been my second choice but her van was already full. I found a place at last in Alejandra's van and sat in the front seat with her. Alejandra handed me the road map and requested me to play the cassette and read the road map whenever necessary.

The three ladies, led by Meiriv, revved the engines and steered the vans into the streets. The journey to New England started. It was a cool damp summer morning, slightly chilly and the streets were less congested. The buildings stood desolate waiting for time, for life within to pour on to the streets. We meandered through the shadowy blocks from one street to the other, passing through the lengthy tunnels, crossing over sprawling bridges intersecting different roads, then came out of the city onto the highways. The roads were marked out in numerous lanes on each carriageway and the traffic spread out in front of us like a field. The girls cruised at an average speed, observing every detail of traffic rules and stopping at various travel plazas for the pilgrims to use the rest rooms, eat and drink coffee, smoke cigarettes and to fill up the vans with gas.

We arrived in Boston by 12 noon and checked in at the Boston Hilton Financial District Hotel. In the afternoon, Don

Tomson, an aged and weary-looking yet determined Emeritus Professor of History, led a walking tour of the Freedom Trail in Boston. We visited strategic parts of the city dignified for its history, churches, and burial grounds of renowned American forefathers, monuments and buildings which gave Boston a touch of traditional antiquity. We came across several Bostonians in colonial costumes, velvety black with large pointed collars and fancy silver buttons at the pockets, front, and cuffs with slits up the middle of the back, the knickers were like black pants of either velour or satin reached slightly below the knees. Above were plain, collared white shirts with lace cuffs, lace surrounding the perimeters of Jabot collars, knee-length hose with gold shoe buckles and black tongues attached to stripes of elastic fitted around black colonial-style shoes. This was complemented with wigs or large bowler hats. They reminded me of the images of slave masters in documentaries and films and the horrible images of horsewhips used in thrashing the slaves, the chains on the feet or manacles worn on the necks of slaves to hold them together and prevent them from escaping. Sometimes they were made to carry heavy baggage or till the farms in chains. The slave masters dressed in the Bostonian outfits, sat on horsebacks with whips, looking queerly and ready to entertain themselves with the laboring starving and dying slaves while dogs went about howling and growling maniacally at them. Those were not images one would like to see again. They kept one in a permanent state of ill-feeling. I felt sorry for Africa and her black souls. Her children had a pitious story of centuries of existence which even Don Tomson found it difficult to narrate.

That afternoon, we rounded off with the first lap of the tour with a visit to Beacon Hill which, as we were told, was the first African American settlement. At the moment of our visit it hosted the African American meeting house and a museum. A queer sensation rocked my nerves as Don Tomson narrated the ordeals of the blacks. I did not like the idea that stories about blacks or Africans were always those of poverty or

misery. Don was however careful in his choice of words. But the essential facts were revealed. As he spoke, I looked away from the group, certain that some of the pilgrims were shrewdly monitoring my reaction. Some blacks emerged from an inner street one after the other, crossed the road and entered another street. They looked fetish and weird. Their long braided hair and thick rusty beard with grizzled patches hanging from their chins gave the impression of sinister appeal or of revolt against human dignity. They had probably never shaved since the beginning or the end of the slave trade, or possibly took an oath never to shave till their kingdom came. They wore sour looks, their faces cast downwards suspicious of the earth on which their feet trod, and most probably they conspired with history never to relinquish the somber expression on their faces which forever carried the marks and woes of history. Poor lost souls! An ancestor's descendant has come to bear testimony of your centuries of woe, I told myself. Tears filled my eyes. I tried to suppress them but they were already settled in the vicinity of the lower eyelid. I kept my eyes open to avoid the drops falling on my cheek. A drop betrayed me, rolled on my cheek and fell on the earth in front of me and several drops followed in swift succession. Turning sharply away from the group, I quickly dried the tears on the sleeve of my shirt, doing all I could to overcome the intensity of the moment, to face reality even long after the pilgrims paid a visit to Harvard University. The images of the black people still filled my mind. Poor lost souls! When I returned to the hotel in the evening I went straight to bed. I had no appetite, resisting even appeals by Joda and Tunis-Aziz to take an evening walk to visit restaurants and shops.

The following morning we did the last lap of the walking tour following the historical trail paying close attention to historic sites, antic buildings and churches which now seemingly served more as tourism sites than places of worship. The historic cemeteries in the vicinity of the church buildings were built in different styles and designs with names of

historical forefathers, messages and symbols carved on the gravestones. Don Tomson, although he was slow and spoke in a low tone, had the narration on his lips like one who had lived the experiences of the centuries he narrated. We returned to the hotel by midday and after lunch, arrangements were made for the journey to Deering in New Hampshire to begin. I remembered that I had to visit the restrooms before any journey so that I didn't become an embarrassment to the group. At the thought of it, the urge became so strong that I had to rush into the restroom and return before the vans took off. In the restrooms reserved for males, I saw Lebanajjar and Kanadia entering one of the toilets with undaunted confidence. Kanadia was last to enter and before I stepped backwards awed by the thought that I had entered the wrong place, my eyes met with hers, and just immediately I heard them turn on the bolt of the toilet door. I looked at the blunt male symbol on the main door and with that assurance I entered the open hall where a number of the toilet doors ranged to the right. I turned to the left, towards one of the several oval male urinary, emptied my bladder and hurried out to meet the others in front of the hotel. They had finished putting their baggage in the boot of the minivans and were now taking their places in them. In addition to the three minivans was Don Tomson's car parked in front of the hotel and the pilgrims were making their choices as to which to enter. Don Tomson wanted some people to go with him and I quickly stepped into his van sitting in front with the old man. Don's wife, equally of age and nice-spoken, was sitting right at the back of the van. Two other pilgrims went with us. I found something penetrating in Don Tomson. He was a mind full of ideas and as we drove from a purely urban settlement, through the quiet dignified historic city of Boston to the romantic countryside of Deering in New Hampshire, we discussed at length about issues concerning the relationship between Africa and the United States.

We made a quick tour of Deering Town then left for a village called Antrim where we were to spend a couple of days.

We took up lodging in Maplehurst Inn, a wooden building of two floors which was constructed, as we were told, towards the end of the 19th century. One could read age on some dilapidated facades of the building but it still maintained its décor and dignity, seemingly the village's major antiquity. The village itself was serene, with beautiful scenery, quietly breathing the fresh ardor of its green wood of pines and oaks and hemlock trees; the village-styled settlements spread out on its quiet terrains against the blue sky and the deep grey luster of the evening.

The innkeeper was a very entertaining lady of Philippine origin, cheerful, welcoming and friendly. She looked girlish, of say some twenty years of age. But her looks were definitely of one who had seen the world. From her initial discussion with some of the ladies she said she had a daughter of twenty-two. Incredible, I thought. I had quickly taken a bath, changed my dresses and joined the ladies in the lobby to listen to her narrate how she came to inherit the inn. I concluded that she was one of those women who refused to grow but who still kept her little stature in restive attraction. She was indeed a lady who had seen the world. This could be seen from the way she set about to make the final arrangements for supper, assisted by a hefty shy-looking lad who moved plates and cutlery around the restaurant clearly visible from the lobby. A little dog with its mouth like the flat face of a hammer played around with a ball. These two seemed to be her only companions.

While the innkeeper went about her business, I decided to have a quick look at the village with Tunis-Aziz and Tugu, before supper time. A few others, including Frances, bought the idea and followed us. We went towards the south end of the village up to a narrow bend and couldn't go further because we were assailed by colonies of black flies that sucked our blood and left parts of the body itching and stained with blood. Frances who had exposed much of her body to enjoy the summer evening suffered severely from the bites. About two hundred meters away, the bites were so offensive that we

returned to the inn. After supper, we went to the Deering Town Hall for the Square Dance.

There were persistent rumors that two pilgrims were missing. Fifteen had arrived at the inn and not seventeen. And Meiriv was at pains finding out who the persons actually were. Some brainstorming had been done and there was suspicion that Lebanajjar and Kanadia had been left behind in Boston.

“Are you sure it’s not Ken?” asked Dos Santos. I cast a long stern glance at him and I was going to exorcise vanity out of him but I was cut short by Meiriv.

“Ken’s here,” she said. “Hey y’ guys, let’s try to be serious,” she went on. Just then, her mobile phone rang. She took it out of her handbag and hurried to the terrace in the main facet of the inn.

“It’s Bill,” she said smiling as she re-entered the lobby. “The hotel in Boston had called Bill to inform him that two of us were left behind. And Bill has just called to confirm. Lebanajjar and Kanadia came out of their hotel rooms after the vans had left,” she said.

“Where are they now,” asked a number of voices simultaneously. They are coming by public transport. And I don’t have any of their numbers. “Hey y’ guys! Take our phone numbers so that when you are missing in Antrip you can easily trace us,” she said. I took down the number as Meiriv dictated it. I was a dreamer and a thing like that could easily happen to me. That would have been subject matter for Lebanajjar’s amusement. Thank God I wasn’t left in Boston. The story would have been different. I vowed to be very cautious not to betray my race with any embarrassing behavior.

At the Deering Town Hall the village folk had gathered to welcome the pilgrims. The live band had been set on stage and the village community watched with excitement as the pilgrims went to the front of the stage one after the other and introduced themselves. We were later asked to watch the village folk dance and take a few practical lessons on the Square Dance. The main dance was the quadrille danced in

couples with teams of four, followed by teams of eight. The team of eight followed the calls. Other demonstration lessons included varieties like the lancer, contras and circles, waltz and polka.

I didn't find the square dance as complicated as I had thought. If one were used to other rhythms and could dance with liveliness, with pride and vivacity like Ndenfuo Atemangwat of Lewoh used to dance Alungachaba, then he definitely had no problems dancing foreign dances. Although the dance styles were different, one basically needed to watch the villagers dance and to follow the instructions of the caller. The caller, a huge assertive lady with a masculine voice flushed in a long black outfit with loose satin shawls around her neck, gave the instructions. We danced the circles, the most popular of the dances, till I found myself sweating profusely.

After dancing the quadrille for long, there was a short pause during which snacks and drinks were served. Then the caller resumed, summoned the dancers to line up for a grand march. As the instruments tuned up, the dancers marched elegantly and delightedly onto the floor until finally a line of couples formed a big round circle. We danced in and out in cycles. Each person danced with the opposite sex, strutting forward in quick classic tempo, stopping to clap, hooking ankle to ankle, swinging round in hops, raising one leg and then the other, swapping partners, strutting forward, sweating out life.... I was once more alive, full of spirit, beaming with smiles, triumphing with life in the company of the village folk.

An incident occurred that reduced the steam in me. The rhythm had now changed from the square dance to some form of waltz. With the swapping of partners, I was now dancing with Grisse. While the country folks grabbed their partners and continued to dance slowly, strutting in technical esoteric patterns, I stood with her for a while looking at each other.

"Can we dance this one?" I asked. Before Grisse had time to decide I took her left hand and placed on my right shoulder, then held her right hand with my left hand slightly above the

shoulder, sent my right hand round her waist and pulled her into my chest. When we started dancing, the first few steps were erratic but I quickly adjusted her to my pace. Grisse completely surrendered her being to me and I took control of it and I owned it; I could feel her soft warm breath on my shoulder, the breath radiated within me like a magic spell while we strutted with ease to the rhythm of the music. I strutted with her, forward, sideways and backward at will, with the liveliness that summoned us into unimaginable depths of romance.

Frances focused her digital camera on us. Grisse lifted her head abruptly from my shoulder and quickly moved her face away from the focus. She was restless and released herself from my hold. Dos Santos who had refused to dance with the natives, had been watching us from a distance. My eyes met with his. He went over to Chilia, held her hand and conducted her to the floor, flung her in and out, stepping on toes and swaying from side to side like a drunk, almost stumbling on Grisse and me. When the tune came to an end, Grisse asked to retire to her seat, apparently nervous and looking at the direction of Frances. She went towards Frances and sat near her. As she spoke with her I saw Frances fidgeting with her digital camera while Grisse observed it with scrutiny. I tried to imagine why Grisse had quickly turned away her face and why she should be pleading with Frances. I felt the glamour and steam of the evening melting away, my spirits dampened.

Later in the inn my spirits started coming to life again. Meiriv, Shizuka and Alejandra invited me to join them in the lobby to drink wine and beer before going to bed. The innkeeper had arranged for a video game which consisted in selecting songs from the device and singing alongside with the video version. At the end of the song the video scored the singer.

“Hey Ken, let’s have a song from you’, said Meiriv when Shizuka ended her song. “You danced so well at the Town Hall and I suspect you must be a good singer too,” she said and

handed the catalogue to me. I have never been a good singer. I remember my secondary school days when I was dismissed from the college choir for poorly intoning a procession song during a Sunday mass. At least, I loved some good music. As a college boy it was fashionable to memorize the wordings and tones of some classics, some of which were still haphazardly arranged in my mind. I turned over the pages of the booklet and found a familiar song by Rod Stewart titled “The First Cut is the Deepest”. Guided by the wordings that appeared on the television screen, the whole rhythm and wordings came back to memory and I sang as if I had rehearsed for weeks. There was great cheer. Pilgrims who had gone to their rooms and those that had formed new romantic unions away from home rushed downstairs to find out what was happening. I was asked to sing another one. I quickly flipped through the booklet again and found a song by Wilson Picket titled “Hey Joe”. When I started singing, Meiriv, Alejandra, Shizuka and others, overtaken by the rhythm, stood and danced, singing with me. There was great cheer and excitement when the song came to an end. They wanted more songs from me but that was already too much. I sneaked away from the lobby, climbed the wooden staircase to my room upstairs and went to bed.

Ten

As soon as I discerned the first rays of daylight filtering through the curtains of my room window, I took a bath, dressed up and went down stairs. It was a fragrant Sunday morning. I stood on the terrace of the inn embracing the invisible waves of fresh air while waiting for the other pilgrims to meet me downstairs. Breakfast was to be eaten in Don Tomson's farm, a little distance from Antrip. From there we were to drive to Deering Town to visit some historic sites.

The pilgrims were taking their time upstairs and weren't descending so soon. I stepped out of the terrace onto the airy arena that served as the parking lot of the inn, then moved towards some nearby woods of mostly pinewood with evergreen needles and oaks and hemlock. A paved track ran down into the woods and I could see a house far into the woodland. The woods were lush-green and the branches formed thick foliage at the top while their stems stood singly straight with very little encroachment of unwanted weed such that one could walk within without getting entangled by the weed. I had the zeal to step into the woods and savor their fragrance. My eyes fell on a signboard on which was written "Dead End: No Trespassing" and I immediately halted my ambitions.

Don Tomson drove in and found me peering at the woods. He wheeled onto the parking lot, stopped the engine.

"Hello Ken, up already?" he asked.

"Yes Don," I said, going towards him.

"Did you enjoy the evening?" asked Don Tomson.

"I did. It was marvelous!" I said. "We had a good time at the Town Hall and great amusement later in the inn."

Meiriv and Alejandra had seen Don Tomson driving in. They hurried to meet him full of apologies.

“Oh Don, welcome,” said Meiriv.

“Ready?” asked Don Tomson.

“In a couple of minutes, Don. We had an exciting evening and we had to delay awhile,” said Meiriv, then she screamed out: “Hey y’ guys! Hurry up. Don’s already around”, she said, her voice resonating in a song. The pilgrims rushed downstairs one after the other and within a short time they were standing out on the terrace of the inn.

“Did they arrive?” asked Don Tomson.

“O yea, Lebanajjar and Kanadia. They arrived last night when we were already at the Town Hall. Kanadia’s here with us.” Kanadia came forward and started narrating what she termed “an ordeal” to Don Tomson, how she went to the restroom and when she came out she saw nobody, went to the reception and was told that the group had left, and while she was still wondering what to do Lebanajjar met her and they both tried to get in contact with Bill who now called Meiriv....

Her eyes met mine and she gave a little start.

“Hello Ken, I haven’t seen you since morning.”

“You’re right,” I said.

“How’re you doing?” she asked.

“Doing great,” I said. She mumbled a few more words then turned towards Lebanajjar and whispered something in his ears.

The group of pilgrims had gathered round Don Tomson waiting to move. Meanwhile Meiriv took the pains to ensure everyone was around so that the error of the day before did not repeat itself. She was right. Tunis-Aziz had had a good dose of wine in the evening and was still sleeping. The innkeeper rushed upstairs to get him up. He came downstairs wiping his face and struggling to buckle his belt, smiling apologetically. We drove to Don Tomson’s farm located in a little forest a few miles away from the main settlement. There were other buildings but very sparsely located. We left the tarred road and began cruising on the earth road that meandered between the trees, the forests became denser and

denser until we arrived at Don Tomson's house. The cool damp earth road littered with dead leaves lying on the flanks of the road passed in front of Don's house disappeared somewhere in the woods across a pond.

Don's house was a wooden duplex surrounded by huge, old maple trees with splendid colors and thick raspberry bushes that extended to the pond down in a wide valley opposite the building's front view. The pond was about the size of a football pitch and it didn't seem to have welcomed many human activities since its existence. Parts of it were covered with water weeds and dead tree branches. The water looked still and awful. Don Tomson said that the main life in the pond was that of weasels. While Don Tomson and his wife set the breakfast on the fanciful tables in a yard chockfull of fruit trees, I went round the house to see the extent of the forest. There was no evidence of another house nearby. I went to the cherry farm then down to the pond to see the weasels. Beautifully-colored birds, giant squirrels, rat moles, tortoises and other animals moved about in the woods, some coming very close to the garden as if that part of the world had completely warded off civilization.

It was a sumptuous breakfast displayed in elegant and ornamental dishes. Different kinds of dishes I wasn't familiar with. In such circumstances I ate anything that could be eaten depending on how pleasant it was to the eyes for fear of betraying my ignorance by asking questions or trying to ask for preferences. But I wasn't the problem. The problem was other nationals who wanted to know about every type of food displayed before they decided what they had to eat. And so Tomson's wife was given the privilege of explaining every detail of the cuisine, and she did this with enthusiasm and devotion.... "Y" got a variety of homemade appetizers, soups and salads, full entrees and gourmets like chicken tenderloins served with buffalo sauce, blue cheese served with veggie sticks, large chicken wings coated on spicy chipotle pepper and oven-roasted, flat bread pizza topped with smoked angus

brisket and jack cheddar cheese, potato boats with jack cheddar cheese and bacon and broccoli and tomatoes served with sour cream.... Y' got fresh greens like house salad, Caesar salad, buffalo chicken salad, summer salad.... Y' got entrees like New York sirloin, fish soft tacos, bacon wrapped sirloin, baked haddock.... Y'got desserts, sandwiches, cupcakes, lemon cream sauce, chocolate dessert, chocolate chip cookies....." Even with the descriptions I couldn't make much difference between the dishes. I learned to eat what I saw and not what I liked. And if in the process of eating I liked what I ate, it kept both body and soul together.

We ate slowly, conversing. When I was full, I took a cup of coffee as it seemed customary and went to meet Don Tomson to ask a few questions about the farmhouse and its environment. Dos Santos sat near him and ate very little. When I joined them at their table he gave me a piercing look, folded his arms and sat back in his chair and I could see that his face was painting red. Tomson welcomed me and ushered me to a seat close to him.

"Hello Ken, I hope you've enjoyed yourself," he said.

"Very much, Don. It's been wonderful. If I may disturb you; where does this road lead to?" I said pointing to the earth road in front of his house.

"The road," repeated Don Tomson.

"Yes. Does it lead to another tarred road on the other side of the pond?" I asked, hoping it wasn't a stupid question.

"Oh no, Ken. It ends somewhere in the forest over there. There's one last farm house on this stretch, half a kilometer from here," said Don.

"Ken, d'you have roads in your country?" asked Dos Santos, releasing his arms and sitting up. I turned sharply towards him, gave him a brief stark stare, wondering whether I should answer him or not. I had to exhibit cautious manners by not expressing annoyance. I knew he wanted to hurt me so that he could draw conclusions about stereotypes. I thought I should be cool and shrewd in such circumstances.

“No”, I said.

“How d’you move around?” asked Dos Santos.

“We skip from tree to tree until we reach our destinations.

“How d’you mean? I can’t understand you,” said Dos Santos.

“I mean, we skip from tree to tree. Bigger trees than these. And your country’s ambassador is an excellent tree climber. A good skipper too. In fact, he occupies one of the biggest trees in the capital city,” I said. Don Tomson issued a brief choking laughter.

“Interesting! His country’s ambassador is an excellent tree climber,” repeated Don still choking with laughter.

“Does that really make sense,” asked Dos Santos laughing some grumpy laughter.

“It really does,” I said. The information quickly went round with: “Did y’ git that? The ambassador of Dos Santos’s country to Ken’s country is an excellent tree climber....” The attention of the rest of the pilgrims was now drawn towards us. Shortly after I could hear individuals describing interesting attributes of ambassadors to their countries. I wondered in the first place why Dos Santos had asked such a question. I could not understand whether his statement was intended to ridicule or it was a blunt expression of his ignorance about my country. I could forgive him because I had heard similar questions and comments about Africa which stemmed more out of ignorance than the desire to inflict pain on me. But his question did not reveal his limited scope of experience about Africa. It could have been caused by something else, maybe by a saturation of civilized thinking that looked at other life patterns unfamiliar with that of civilized thinking, from the angle of detestable rigidity.

The heavy breakfast and the little irritation Dos Santos had caused me developed the urge in me to visit the restroom. The one downstairs was occupied so I went upstairs. After using the one upstairs, the door would not open from inside no matter how I tried it. I was confused, sweating profusely. I

thought I should knock at the door violently or shout so loud that anyone in the house and the nearby forests could hear. The method was going to be very crude, an interesting subject for discussion for those who were on the alert for stereotypical behavior. I immediately came back to myself and showed some restraint while trying other strategies. What if they left me in a toilet in the country house? Only Don Tomson and his wife lived there and sure they were to travel with the pilgrims to the town of Deering after breakfast. How was I going to get out of that forest? We had hardly met any vehicle when we left the tarred road on our way to the farm. Was I just going to keep trying quietly for the sake of civilization or shout and bang the door to attract the attention of people and get liberated? After struggling for a couple of minutes I found the trick. The lock had a little lever that looked like a trigger. It automatically bolted the door from inside. I went down stairs just when the pilgrims were giving appreciation. Dos Santos who still held a cup of coffee, commented on the ornament in the sitting room and went indoors. Departure from the farmhouse was not immediate because Don obliged the pilgrims to visit his red cherries farm. Down a little escarpment was the farm with the small red thorny fruit, brightly spotted in the thick, green undergrowth.

“Eat as much as you can but don’t pull off the stem,” shouted Don. The pilgrims fell on the cherries, appreciating Don’s farming skills.

We heard a violent knock at a door accompanied with the maniacal voice of someone shouting from the upper floor of the building: “Hullo! Who’s there? Please, don’t leave me behind!”

“It’s Dos Santos,” said Meiriv.

“What’s he doing upstairs?” asked Alejandra.

“Please, someone should open the door for me. I’m blocked in,” shouted the voice again. Meiriv and Alejandra rushed to the building went upstairs and returned with Dos Santos. He was mopping the sweat on his face and explaining

how a door had played a trick on him. The pilgrims went to Don and his wife in groups and thanked them for the breakfast, boarded the vans then drove off, Don and his wife still leading the tour.

We spent the rest of the morning touring the town of Deering, a semi urban settlement in the northmost part of New Hampshire. In the afternoon we returned to Antrip to visit individual families in the village. Arrangements had been made prior to our arrival on the modalities of hosting the pilgrims. Frances and I visited the LaFortune's family. LaFortune was a French-Canadian who lectured in a college in New Hampshire same as his wife. He told us they had bought the country cottage a couple of years before to prepare for their retirement and that was where they spent most of their summer holidays. Their daughter was doing French as a major in college and had requested that their guests be those from French-speaking countries. LaFortune picked us up at the inn and we had a long lunch session in his house. It was a lonely cottage of semi storey structure, the extended part of the parlor made of glass walls also served as a dining hall, located on a hill from where one could perceive the romantic scenery of the countryside, its undulating slopes and verdant green trees merging at the furthestmost point with the horizon. Somewhere in the middle of the green at a distance was a mass of blue. It could have been a big lake because from the country house one could see that it occupied a large portion of the valley in which it was located, about the size of a big swimming pool bordered by thick green vegetation.

LaFortune and his wife were occupied with our presence, tracing every bit of their imagination to give the best they could afford to guests from far away in the world. Their words matched actions, hurrying feet shuffled between the kitchen and the open porch to the glass dining hall with spices of "darling" and "honey", setting on the spacious dining table different kinds of cuisines, cutlery and wines. We ate and talked about our experiences and later LaFortune and his wife went to

the kitchen. On their return, he carried a bowl of steaming seashells while his wife carried a tray of cheese of different made. She set down the tray and requested our attention to explain the different kinds of cheese – Chinese cheese, French cheese, American cheese and Italian cheese. She ate much of the cheese herself, licking her fingers passionately and occasionally saying “Italian cheese, my favorite”. Frances ate with the detailing finesse of an aristocrat, identifying the kinds of food on the table and comparing it with French cuisine. She spoke in a cozy tone with accomplished articulation, dominating most of the conversation about French cuisine until LaFortune diverted the conversation to the US invasion of Iraq; whether it wasn’t time for the troops to withdraw. It was causing a split in public opinion and as LaFortune said, that was not good for America. He was a democrat and didn’t quite like the politics of George Bush.

After a lengthy lunch session, LaFortune and his family took us into the woods to show the extended part of their estate. We moved further uphill where the lushness of the countryside became more evident. The lake now had a more open view. It appeared to be larger than when we were in the cottage, bordered by trees while nature reserved some of its mystery still to be revealed to human understanding. Up the hill, the woods consisted mainly of oak, hemlock and pine trees. Some of the trees had shed their leaves and the ground lay covered with yellow leaves; some had not yet shed their leaves but the leaves had become yellow, while a vast majority still maintained their green lushness. I understood that the falling leaves were announcing the beginning of the fall. We went further uphill while LaFortune explained that in winter wolves and bears came very close to the residence. But he had a means of keeping them away.

Night was approaching and for fear of dangerous animals like the wolves we returned to the cottage, took our last gulps of wine and bade farewell. Frances thanked our host and hostess in profusion and with politeness giving me very little

chance to show my appreciation for the wonderful afternoon spent in the woods. LaFortune drove us back to the inn, amidst Frances' profusion of politeness. Were people really what they made others think? If the world were as such with what I experienced that afternoon then it would be a harmonious paradise of God's dream. That could not be the case. I believed we were living in a plastic world, a world of plastic emotions and feelings; a world in which people did things as acts of fulfillment not acts begotten from the genuine expression of the mind. The best of civilizations in human relationships was sheer tolerance which had its limits. And once tolerance reached its limits betrayal ensued. The incident with Grisse at the square dance crept back to my consciousness. That was a good example of tolerance and then betrayal and I was beginning to consider everyone to possess such traits. I felt some light contraction in my nerves and struggled to let it off so that it didn't spoil my day, a wonderful afternoon in the country house with the LaFortunes. We arrived at the inn and Frances in her usual profusion of politeness expressed thanks to LaFortune and I just managed to say "Thanks and Goodbye".

"Goodbye Ken, goodbye, Frances. Enjoy your stay in the US," said LaFortune. As soon as we stepped out of the van he wheeled sharply and sped off. Many other groups had returned and they were narrating their experiences in the different homes in the village of Antrip. I sat at a corner and while their voices crowded my ears, my mind roamed across the countryside, over the green slopes and the lake and the forests and the bears and the wolves making their day on the hill in the woods in which we had spent the afternoon.

Eleven

We set out for New York at dawn, stopping at the industrial museum at Lowell, Massachusetts before continuing our journey. Don Tomson accompanied us to Lowell. It was the final lap of his narratives. He invited me to travel in his van. There were four other pilgrims in the van including his wife who had taken her seat in the rear of the van. I had not noticed her until when Don and I revived our conversation about life in Africa and the United States.

“Is polygamy still practiced in Africa?” asked Don Tomson.

“Yes,” I said. “My father has five wives. And you know what?”

“Tell us Ken,” said a couple of voices instantly, adjusting their sitting positions and craning their necks towards me.

“My grandfather had twenty-one wives and a flood of children,” I said.

“My God, twenty-one!” someone exclaimed.

“What was he doing with all of these women?” asked another equally expressing shock.

“That’s slavery!” exclaimed another.

“Not at all. My grandfather managed his twenty-one wives based on a scheme dutifully executed by his first wife,” I said.

“Interesting! What was the role of the first wife?” asked one of the pilgrims.

“She scheduled meetings between the women and grandpa, a kind of assistant to grandpa. The scheme was based on some objective logic with the younger wives given the priority,” I said.

“Incredible,” said Don Tomson. “Each woman takes her turn.”

“Of course,” I answered.

“For how long?” asked Don Tomson.

“Could be for a couple of days, I suppose,” I said

“Awful,” said Don’s wife. “It could take months for the circle to complete.”

“Not necessarily,” I said.

“It means you people in Africa don’t get married for love,” said one of the pilgrims.

“We get married for the sake of children, and with children, there is abundant love in the family,” I said. We sat quiet for a moment as the minivan rumbled its way through on the tarmac.

“How many wives, Ken?” asked Don.

“I had one but she died last year,” I said.

“Ooooooh! Sorry....We’re so sorry....You never told us that before,” said a couple of voices disparately.

“Getting married to another, soon?” asked Don.

“I hope so,” I said.

“How many...what’s your limit?” someone asked.

“I guess one. Not so sure but not more than one,” I said.

“Why? You have to respect your tradition,” said Don Tomson.

“For me, not so sure. But many others do. For them the number of wives a man has determines his social status,” I said.

“Doesn’t this encourage the spread of HIV and AIDS?” asked one of the pilgrims who had remained quiet all this while.

“It does in one way but also limits in another,” I said.

“How’s that?”

“Polygamy ensures that every woman has a husband. And that’s safer. Single persons are more serious agents of transmission, aren’t they?” I asked.

“I agree with you,” said the other pilgrim. “In monogamy, there’s always an extramarital affair somewhere along the line. I mean, there’re lots of monogamy guys out there who zip down skirts every damned second.”

“Female population far exceeds that of men,” I said. “Thus polygamy seems to solve a big social problem in Africa.

Imagine that world population reads sixty percent men and forty person women.”

“There will be chaos,” said someone.

“The world will cease to exist”, said another.

“Do..., do the men...African polygamous men, do they really satisfy these women?” asked another, rather searching for words.

“Of course, they do. They are equal to their tasks,” I said.

“But the women become subjected to the men and no longer their equals,” said Don Tomson.

“Maybe,” I said. “The quest for absolute equality is challenging God’s artifice.” A number of voices retorted variously:

“No, no, no! We can’t listen to that.”

“That’s not true Ken.”

“You don’t mean it!”

“Thank God it’s only in Africa.”

“D’you mean African men abuse women’s rights,” asked Don’s wife when there was some calm.

“Not at all. The men recognize that African women are more effective and reliable managers and partners. Aside their public duties, they take care of the home,” I said.

“And what do the men do?” Don’s wife cut in, in a rather high pitch.

“They recognize that the women have more important roles to play and assist them to accomplish these roles in every possible way. And there is peace in the home,” I said.

“Great difference with the United States,” said Don Tomson. “More than 70% of the cases reported to the police in many cities, have to do with matrimonial disagreements. Very great difference with the United States.”

“And may I know the reasons for such disagreements, honey?” asked Don’s wife.

“Of course, we all know the reasons,” said Don.

“And where can we find them, honey?” asked his wife.

“It’s written on the face of every American woman. Don’t you think so, honey?” said Don Tomson, occasionally lifting his head to observe his wife’s reaction on the rear mirror.

“Not exactly, Don,” said his wife. “It’s engraved on the brows of every American man. And y’know that very well, Don.”

“We’re both saying the same thing, Julia,” Said Don to his wife.

At that moment we were driving into the parking lot of the Lowell industrial museum. Don Tomson parked his van, came out and stood behind the driver’s door and waited until I came out.

“Ken, it’s been wonderful talking with you,” he said shaking hands with me. “I hope that someday we will be able to meet again. Enjoy your stay in the United States, Ken. It was wonderful meeting you,” said Don, shook my hand again, and then turned to talk with Meiriv and Shizuka who parked their vans and came towards us. He led a tour of the textile industrial complex and after that he drove off with his wife. The pilgrims were now preparing to take off for New York.

“Hi Ken,” said Shizuka. “Are you coming with me this time?” she asked.

“Okay,” I said and followed her to her van.

“Don’s told me you had a great drive with him,” she said.

“I’m sure we did,” I said.

“What were you guys talking about, Ken?” she asked, stepped smartly into the van, sat behind the steering wheel then adjusted her seat, buckled up her seat belt, then closed the shutter.

“Politics, life styles in Africa and the US,” I said entering the van. Five other persons were already seated in there.

“Which language do you speak in Africa?” asked Grisse.

“Africa is a continent and not a tribe,” I said and went on to answer questions from other persons who wanted to know more about Africa. I noticed their enthusiasm and explained every detail of African life as the questions came in. I felt tired

and hungry. Fortunately we were programmed for lunch in a town after Lowell after which we visited a few historic sites and continued our journey. We arrived in New York City at nightfall.

Twelve

As soon as the pilgrims returned from New England, I sent several emails to my brother hoping that he might have resumed work. The same auto-reply message came to me. I remembered that I had a friend teaching in a university in Texas. He could know something about my brother or other Cameroonians living in New York. He was an intimate friend and kinsman who had won the Diversity Immigrant Lottery Program and went to the US with his family and was lucky to secure a teaching position in a university in Texas. We had exchanged several emails since my arrival and he was excited about my visiting the United States and promised to invite me to Texas when my program came to an end. But I couldn't make a definite statement because I had not seen my brother. I was getting weary and tired searching for my brother. I sent my brother's names and descriptions to him but my friend wrote back to say he had no idea about him. He promised however to contact the network of kinsmen he knew in New York. But he soon sent word that no one seemed to know anything about him. My friend hoped to meet me soon to discuss some issues of importance which he said he didn't want to disclose by phone or email. My imagination roamed wildly to figure out what the matter was that couldn't be discussed over phone. I longed to meet him early enough to know what was in his mind.

I had to some extent mastered how to go about in New York on my own. During some optional activities in the evening like the ballets and operas in Times Square, I went to interesting neighborhoods, most often on foot to visit the shops and other attractions. I came across some blacks and tried to find out if they knew any Cameroonian around. Those that had time for me replied somehow politely: "Not so sure about daet..." Some did not as much as look in my direction

or told me “I got shifts, men,” and hurried off, sometimes brushing me aside if I stood in their way. I wondered what world it was. No one had any time for the other. Everyone was in a hurry. Everyone was busy about life. In the massive flow of people no one stopped to say “Hi” to the other. Apart from some of the coupled ones who moved hand in hand in expressive romantic galore, stopping to find some time to kiss, everyone had his or her head up hurrying to destinations. Not all the couples moved in delight. Some held hands but looked in different directions, their faces colored with sour expressions, pulling each other as they moved as if to some disastrous destiny. Each person’s destiny seemed clearly in his or her own mind carried like a burden, unknown to others through the street, through the world, through life. Many others had time for their dogs. They moved with their dogs talking with them, some made their dogs stand on their hind legs and they caressed their heads and kissed them. Some dogs were dressed fancifully and at times the men and women stooped to talk to the dogs, or caress and kiss them. Often when two dogs met and tried to amuse themselves their owners understood and stopped to let the dogs play for a while, then they would pull the dogs away without talking to each other, except sometimes expressing wry smiles.

I turned away from thinking about New Yorkers and their dogs. My desire was to know the whereabouts of my brother. I made some last attempts and moved towards another black fellow whom I believed from his looks would be understanding. Instead the fellow moved away saying: “Gat no dime for no bum beggar, men.” It took me time to understand the implication of his statement. Did I dress so poorly that I was taken for a beggar? What actually showed that I was a beggar? Was it the way I stopped him? I was polite enough for anyone who had gone to school to know that I wasn’t begging but that I desperately needed some information. A feeling of disgust arraigned me and I could feel a certain weakness of my muscles and a dizziness that prompted me to go back to my

apartment. It became evident that my brother had played a trick on me and exposed me to the humiliation I was experiencing in New York.

Did I look like bum or a beggar or a beggar and a bum? I tried to understand what could have caused the fellow to call me a beggar. As soon as I got to the apartment I went to the bathroom and examined myself in the mirror. Did I really look like a beggar? I had seen so many beggars and homeless people in New York. And as days went by I saw more and more of them in public places, transport routes, urban parks, and sidewalks. Aggressive panhandlers asked for money with bold and intemperate arrogance: "I want change, please!" Others carried cardboard papers with bum signs: "HOMELESS AND HUNGRY, GOD BLESS YOU," "WHY LIE, I WANT A BEER," "NINJAS KILLED MY FAMILY NEED MONEY TO REVENGE"....

I left the bathroom and stood at the window, looked down in the streets and then at the tower on which the clocks were fixed. I fixed my eyes on the minute hand to see if it was moving at all. It was moving at its own pace but very reluctantly so. I thought about home, my office, colleagues and friends. That evening I had very little appetite for food. Even when I went to bed I could not sleep immediately. My mind was roving the universe of issues which when I woke up in the morning I could not easily make out. In the morning I took a bath, ate breakfast and went to the conference room in Greene Street.

The talk that morning was delivered by McDough, a Professor of Economics in New York University. The topic was "Poverty in America: Individualism and American Business Enterprise". The topic sounded interesting to me and I was hopeful that some of the puzzles I had in mind were going to be resolved. The dreariness of the previous evening and that early morning was beginning to fade and I was optimistic that the Professor would explain the phenomenon of beggars and the homeless in public places in New York.

“Africa is very poor,” the Professor said. “Only a few people can afford to eat one good meal a day,” he went on. I couldn’t understand him, and then a curious indignation heated my veins. I shuffled in my chair, turning my head slowly round to observe the other members of the group looking in my direction. I could imagine what was going on in their minds. I could imagine them thanking their gods for not making them Africans. The lecture boosted their ego, assured them that their existence was more meaningful than those of us from Africa.

“Ken,” Pakista whispered in my ears, noticing that I felt uneasy. “He’s not talking to you. Please, ignore.”

“Thank you, Ma’m” I said to her. I waited until McDough concluded his lecture with some sketchy statement about business enterprises in America, gulped two mouthfuls of water, clasped his hands and leaned back in his chair with the airs of an accomplished professor. He was heavily applauded by a majority of the pilgrims for the brilliant talk. And as soon as the moderator of the session asked for questions and comments, I immediately put up my hand.

“Yes, your hand’s up,” said the Professor leaning forward.

“Thank you Professor McDough,” I said. “Your talk has been quite thought-provoking. However, I don’t agree with discussions that always present Africa as a great smear of misery. Have you been to Africa?”

“No. And what about that? Do I need to travel to Africa to establish a scientific fact?” the Professor asked.

“So where do you get your information from, if you’ve never been to Africa?” I asked.

“Of course, I don’t need to go to Africa to know about the continent,” he said turning and looking round victoriously. “I mean, everyone knows that Africa is a poor continent.”

“If I may say, Professor, with all the respect due you, I think it is important for a specialist on poverty in Africa to make a trip to the continent. Field experience is required for such expert studies. Besides, if Africa is poor, the question one

should be asking is: why is Africa poor?" I said." Professor McDough cut in angrily.

"You want to tell me about science? I mean, this is a fellow who wants to talk science with me?" He asked. I went on to explain what I meant but we were both talking at the same time until the moderator stopped us and directed the questions and comments to the original topic of discussion.

I felt abashed that I had to exchange words with Professor McDough. It wasn't proper for me to argue with such a renowned academic. I feared that I might step on the toes of my benefactors upon whose charitable sponsorship I was able to see the world, not only the American world but a cross-section of the world's continents represented by the pilgrims. The goodwill of my benefactors, I feared could be damaged by my asking too many questions that displeased the individuals in a country where human right protection and individual liberties and color and tribal barriers were being dismantled every day. I pledged within myself not to contend with any other speaker. But I wished I could give a talk about Africa. I had a feeling that many non-Africans didn't really know much about the continent. Africa was the continent of great diversity, bustling with life and passion! I wished I could say something to remove the blemishes on Africa. It was difficult to convince the rest of the over twenty-five scholars in the room that Africa was not the way people from other continents thought. It was necessary to make my opinion heard. But my voice was meek in the midst of people who held unshakable prejudices against the continent.

Even if Africa were poor, anyone could be violating the rights of the poor by giving the issue so much articulation and without providing concrete solutions to the problem. It didn't suffice to say that Africa was poor as if it were a new discovery. I was not dismissing the fact that Africa was disadvantaged in many ways. But to talk of Africa always as a cursed continent was *wuru-wuru* talk. Sheer *bekwadi*! It was challenging God's design for the world. The western media of course always

projected terrifying images of Africa to entertain the western audience. And any scientific investigations based on those reports could produce very devastating results. That is why Africa suffers. There were even talks about how big international NGOs grew rich by trading on poverty in Africa. They produced photographs of slums and extreme cases of dilapidating social conditions and asked for funding from donors and charitable organizations with the aim, in their opinion, to redress the situation. Nothing was ever done apart from taking more photographs and posting the idea that the situation was continuously bad. The world was thirsty for Truth. While some virtuous persons and organizations out there were working earnestly to bring peace to the world, others were working hard to suckle animal instincts. War and diplomacy had failed the world and civilization had drained every iota of credibility in human conscience. The only valid weapon for world peace was Truth, to accept Truth about our being and that of others. No circumventions on pretexts or claims to belong to advanced social order, yet with no one to talk to, keyed up in ensnaring limousines or towering skyscrapers with shaky foundations. What was the world toiling for when it was clear that all human effort only led towards death's dark desire? There was urgency for peace in the world. Peace, I say, if only human civilizations begin to see difference as a blessing from God not as anathema, to see difference in skin color, sex, religion, and cultures as the immutable design by God to endow upon the world the riches of beauty. That way, the world could begin to experience peace on the war front, peace on the diplomatic front, peace across the borders of citizenship, peace in our moral and rational spaces, peace on the peripheries of spirituality, peace in the innermost sanctum of spirituality....

At the end of that morning's session I took my bag and left for the Palladium. Tunis-Aziz ran after me calling: "African Lion!" We went to the Palladium talking about that morning's session. Tugu on the other hand had long reconciled himself

with the humiliation. He let things go, going about almost unnoticed. Tunis-Aziz invited me to set up his new laptop and connect it with the university internet system in his apartment. I had acquired the experience when I bought my laptop and the university technician had installed it for me. And when I succeeded to set up Tunis-Aziz's laptop many of the pilgrims invited me to their apartments to install theirs and other accessories. I had an interesting way of doing it. As soon as I installed the internet in the laptop, I quickly searched the internet and played the national anthem of the country. There was usually a lot of excitement at the surprise of having one's own national anthem played in new media equipment in his or her apartment in a faraway land. And we spent the evenings singing our various anthems....

Thirteen

On the third day after my arrival in Lewoh country a strong wind blew in the early hours of the morning. It was followed by a little drizzle. The night had been a long one, a very long night. My mind had travelled thousands of kilometers across the United States reliving the splendor of adventure on the trail of civilization. Events muddled up in my mind and then flowed gradually and consistently until the wind brought me to full consciousness early that morning. I left off the dream with a little sadness. There was one longing which had not been fulfilled, a longing that had been the focus of my travel and which I hoped to find, a longing which my mother was desperately concerned with. This had to do with my brother whom I was unable to trace. My search had been futile, leaving a sour taste in my mouth that morning. I thought about my old mother who was just coming in as I woke up. I could hear her footsteps in the parlor asking someone if I was still in bed or had gone out of the compound.

“He is still sleeping,” said my sister who sat in the parlor waiting for me to get out of bed.

“What kind of sleep when people who went to early farms are already returning?” asked my mother. Shortly after, I heard a knock at the door. “Iwe”, she called with the familiar fondness of my childhood days.

“Mami,” I said, rising to open the door. She came in and sat on a lone chair in the room.

“Did you sleep well, child?” she asked.

“Yes Mami,” I said.

“You people who have lived in the red man’s country know how to sleep. With us in the village, we would be up and going to places. What am I even saying? Those who went to early farms have returned to prepare food and to leave again to do the main work of the day,” she said. I stretched myself and

listened to her as she spoke. Then after a short pause, she went on. "*Shuo-shuo*, do everything to visit your father. Do so as soon as you wash your face. You cannot spend two days in the village without meeting those who lie underneath our fate," she said and left the room. She had not reached the parlor when I heard the familiar butt of the staff she carried stumping on the hard concrete floor towards the room.

"I forgot one thing," she said. "Don't forget that you have to go to Beyano village to condole with the orphans and the widows. Remember to go with something for their funeral basket. When your father died the chief and his wives came like people, carrying jugs of wine and food. His masquerade was one of the best during your father's death celebration. Do not hesitate. Every person in Lewoh has been there except you. You cannot wait until the funeral day to go there," she said. Going to Beyano village was expedient. I had to go to Beyano village as my mother had advised. Putting aside the fact that Fuo Beyano and my father had strong connections, it was incumbent to visit one another to show compassion in times of trouble. It was a moral responsibility for me. Besides, there was something my soul was yearning for and I could achieve this by going to Beyano village. This was the land I thought I knew, but for the short time I was in the village I discovered that there was still so much I had to learn. Bombabili's pronouncements deepened a quest in me. I felt moody, realizing something really absent from my being. Walking across the chilly countryside was going to enliven my spirits. I decided to go to Beyano Village and then Anya Palace the next day to understand the dispute surrounding Fuo Beyano's burial. I needed to understand the earth on which my feet trod, the cross point between the church and the palace. And there was my mother's entreaty to visit the shrine accompanied by my sister. I reflected over the issue and believed there was something innate that she intended me to achieve by visiting the ancestral shrine.

Besides, Bombabili's statements tickled me and I could begin to see things in a clearer way. I was not myself. I was a stranger in me. I needed to redefine my purpose and objectives in life. I was an educated man but that could only be at the level of reading and writing books. The real education seemed to be what I had not truly attained, something contrary to a mass of books and experience. There was something missing in me which my mother and Bombabili seemed to perceive faster than I did and wanted to guide me towards attaining it. And my experiences in the US proved just that, that I was a child of the world but who should be defined by my own native values. These values were enshrined in the place where my mother delivered me and to which she probably wanted me to pay allegiance. That was it. But there was still a missing link between me and my universe. I still needed to redefine the self in me, for it seemed the shadow had moved further away from the substance. And there was no way it could be substituted. This could make things even worse. Seek the self, I told myself, and attach it to the shadow. The seeming undefined unconscious ire had been such for some time and I was only beginning to discover it. However, the idea of going to the ancestral shrine still bordered my mind. I was still trying to convince myself whether it was necessary or not. Bestial worship, ancestral worship, or totem worship could as well still be practices of ancestral traditions. My father usually involved the household in the rituals. But that was a long time ago. When I was in the primary school, I participated in a number of rituals in the shrine led by a diviner when there were very serious problems facing the household. Sometimes my father just thought of greeting the gods when he was happy with his household.

My father performed the last ritual the year I graduated from primary school. I was big enough to notice every detail of the event. I remember that he had gathered the family to celebrate the peace his household was enjoying at the time. He said he did not need to wait for misfortune before he

communed with the spirits that guarded the household. Sometimes he invited a diviner to perform a ritual. But on this day and a few other times he performed rituals on his own. He ensured that my elder brother stood close to him to watch every detail of his performance, sent him on minor errands or assigned him to do one thing or the other. Two days before the ritual was performed he had instructed my mother to provide salt, melon seeds and palm oil. He also told his fifth wife to provide *ndindie* seeds, *nkeng* branches and *mbebuoh* leaves. The following day he went to a neighboring village with my elder brother and returned with a healthy he-goat which he slaughtered to grace the event. Much of the meat was cooked and a little quantity sliced into tiny bits and mixed with oil and salt. During the ritual my father gathered his *atsenandia* consisting of his five wives, the children and very close relatives in the shrine. The shrine was too small and other children stood outside. But my father made sure that my elder brother was beside him watching whatever he was doing. I squeezed myself into the hut until I could see what my father was doing. Inside the shrine were odd pieces of furniture. Beads and cowry shells were placed in a cyclic pattern on raised earth that looked like an altar. At the foot of the raised earth stood a carved wooden stool, parts of which had been eaten by termites. Directly in front of my father near the rear wall were a line of clay pots covered on the earth. A carved wooden staff leaned on a far angle of the wall. He showed my elder brother the different “heads” of the ancestors and calling them by name he uncovered the wooden bowls and the clay pots one after the other and scattered the slices of meat mixed with salt and palm oil over the “heads of the dead” saying:

“*Bellem atsenandia* Mbe Tanju-Ngong, Fathers and Mothers, you, who have gone before us and are living in the world of the ancestors, we are gathered here to greet you and to offer you some little food from our hard work, the way you taught us. You liaise with the gods of the clan. And with Fuondem, the

most terrific who provides happiness for those who remember you and curse those who go contrary to your ways.

When there is a pestilence in the land and our crops do not grow well, do we not come to you to complain and to ask for redemption? When we are strong enough to provide a goat or a chicken, do we not also come to thank you for giving us abundance?

We, your children, the household of Mbe Tanju-Ngong whose umbilical cord stretches to the stool of Acha-ajong, have come to salute you and to thank you for the blessings you have given us. We beseech you to cover our heads with *mbebueh* leaves, to continue to give us good health, children and peace in our homes....”

My father opened the clay pots and scattered the bits of meat around the ash-colored objects that were covered with the wooden bowls and clay pots. When I looked closely I realized that the ashy white objects were already weathered off and some were broken down, held together by the clay pots. There were altogether eight “heads” covered with the clay pots and wooden bowls and my father spoke to each calling his or her name and highlighting their status in the family, from Atehmbo-Ngong to Ajuha-Ngong. He poured raffia wine around the “heads” as he spoke. Bubbles formed quickly and the wine disappeared quickly on the thirsty earth. When he started covering the “heads” first with the *mbebueh* leaves and then with the clay pots and wooden bowls my mother started singing *eseib* and the other women joined in. They continued singing, throwing salt, melon seeds and palm oil on the earth as they left the shrine:

*Our fathers and mothers in the earth
we offer you this salt and palm oil
we soften the earth
so that you continue to
give us, health and children.*

*So that you continue to
give us abundant harvest.*

*Our mothers and fathers
it is only you who can tell
when a tailless dog is thanking you.*

My father led the women and the children to the *lemoo*, an open hall in the main house. The women sang and danced round throwing salt and palm oil on the floor and yet they danced on and on until there were signs that people were tired and hungry. The singing and dancing stopped and the women went to their houses and returned with dishes of food and placed them on the open ground at the center of the hall. My father on his part asked my brother to bring in two jugs of palm wine and a pot in which the rest of the goat meat he had slaughtered for the ritual was preserved. Our eyes were all fixed on the meat as my father cut it into pieces putting aside some pieces that we were to take to his friends and other relations thereafter.

“Aha!” he said, stopped sharing the meat and looked towards the entrance of the compound. “Who says the gods of our ancestors are not kind to us?” Everyone in the *lemoo* turned to look towards the open road descending into the compound. He was a visitor, an elderly man who took his time to place his footsteps as he came into the compound. “Who says they have not heard our prayers?” said my father.

“Mbe,” said my mother. That was how my father’s wives called him. “Mbe, do you see this? It is true what our forefathers said, that you cannot end a good sacrifice to the ancestors without a visitor coming in. You see how the gods do their things?”

“I hear you, Ngwi-nkem,” said my father. “Ankwetta, sit on the other chair so that Mbe Eshuofuo can sit there.” By the time he finished rearranging the seating order, the visitor had reached the door.

“I salute you all,” said the visitor.

“Mbe Eshuofuo, come well. Come in and sit right here,” said my father ushering the man to a seat on the rear wall where a row of chairs was reserved for title holders and elders.

“Mbe Tanju-Ngong, let me greet you again. The entire household is here. I see that you remembered your ancestors and your household gods today,” said the visitor removing a bundle of colanuts from his raffia bag and handing them to my father.

“Thank you, child of a chief. The man who brings colanuts on a day like this is a messenger of good faith. We shall break them and share with our ancestors,” said my father. He took the healthiest of the colanuts, broke it into lobes. He had possibly wanted to finish sharing the meat before offering his guest colanuts but his guest had acted so soon. As Nweh people say, he who denies his guest colanuts denies him love. My father took the healthiest lobe and threw on the ground saying: “Our fathers and mothers gone before us, that is your own,” he said then shared the rest beginning with Mbe Eshuofuo. “Mbe Eshuofuo, I have not seen you for many seasons,” he said.

“I am alive. The river that runs down the hills does not hide its voice in the valleys. Last night I thought we had not met for so long and I decided to visit you today. I did not think I could meet anyone because today is *Ankoah*, a day people are occupied with different things. I did not know the gods were sending me on an errand.”

“I am happy you came. The sacrifice would never be a good one without the gods’ messenger coming in,” said my father. He finished sharing the meat and the women shared the food and everyone sat quietly eating, drinking and talking about the issues of the land. Then my mother intoned another song and the women sang and danced round the hall singing praises to the ancestors for sending the visitor who came in to share with the family. When the song ended, the visitor stood, cleared his voice and spoke.

"I greet Mbe Tanju-Ngong's household and the gods and ancestors of Tanju-Ngong. When I walked alone on my path, I did not know I was coming to meet a household here. Is there a way you would say I am not a member of this family?"

"Not at all," my father and his wives answered in a chorus.

"If I came here it was because the gods of Tanju-Ngong's household willed it. *Bebieu feib mboh*," said the man shoving his hands forward and opening his palms in the position of one receiving something in both hands. Instantly, too my father and his wives stood and the children followed opening their palms in the similar manner, then the man spoke:

"Our fathers and mothers living in the earth, you have heard the voices of your children today in song and prayer and shared the little meat and drink with them. Raise your heads from the earth and continue to protect this household."

"Ya!" everyone answered.

"That anyone who has wicked intensions for this family, let him not see the rays of the sun when the morning wakes."

"Ya!"

"Let him not be able to cross the Bechafem River or the Anya stream."

"Ya!"

"That the gods of Mbe Tanju-Ngong and his entire household should continue to rain good luck on the children and give their father the strength and the means to marry more wives and make more children. Is it not said that a man whose compound is filled up with women and children makes himself a king?"

"Ya!"

"Let the gods of our ancestors soften the wombs of our women so that they will continue to deliver children."

"Ya!"

"Let them anoint mothers with affection for the children of this household. They should smash with the leg and pick with the hand."

"Ya!"

“If anyone thinks evil of Mbe Tanju-Ngong and his household, let the enemies’ plans revert on their heads.”

“Ya!”

“Mbe Tanju-Ngong, if you hit your leg on a stone, let that stone break into pieces.”

“Ya!”

“Let that stone break into pieces!”

“Ya!”

“That you and your household shall continue to lead a prosperous life.”

“Ya!”

“A prosperous life...”

“Ya!” said the others. Then led by the speaker each one brought his mouth closer to the palms and blew air into them. The women broke into a song praising Mbe Eshuofuo, the messengers of the gods, a friend who was more than a friend.... The song ended and the women collected whatever dishes and cutlery they had brought and went to their houses. My father sent my elder brother to take little parcels of meat to his friends and relations. The following day my father announced that the ancestors were very happy with the household, that the white termites had eaten the melon seeds and pieces of meat that were offered to the ancestors.

Those were the days. These days the world seemed to be catching up with myriad ways tearing souls apart, confusing souls, estranging souls, making it difficult for a conscious mind to decide who he or she was. Traditional rituals and the modern world.... Could one say he or she was moving the world forward by indulging in ancient practices? Shouldn’t one be thinking about the exploits of science and how it can improve on the human condition rather than allow oneself to be engulfed by the aspirations of people like my mother who had spent all her life in a rudimentary environment? But then she was beginning to make me feel a certain sensibility towards

her and her recent vision of life. She was self-assuring and determined to open up a new vision of life for me.

I walked over to the parlor and found my mother sitting there with my sister. It was a long time she left my room and had possibly not gone to her house, waiting for me to freshen up and meet them. She might have been very determined to urge me towards what she considered of prime importance at the moment. She probably just wanted me to recover from the sleepiness she had met me with to continue with the pursuit of her objectives. I avoided looking in her direction but I could still see her peering sternly in my face. She bore the expression of one who could immediately seize me and force me to do what she wanted me to do. I greeted my sister and inquired after her children and her husband. She said her husband and his relations were coming in the evening to greet me. I sat on a chair to find out from her how I could prepare to receive them. I thought it was a way too of distracting my mother from her concerns. Instead, it was a good occasion for her to move squarely into it.

“Child,” she said, “First thing, create time and go to Beyano village to condole with the widows and the orphans before people start calling your name. I think you have rested enough. Concerning your own life, and I am happy that your sister is here to hear me say this. Don’t you think that not being able to get married at your age is a sign of anger from the ancestors?”

“But I was married before,” I said.

“I know, child, and that was two seasons ago. Do you not think that even the death of your first wife was a way your ancestors were showing anger to you? How can any male at your age live like a knife without a handle? Your sister can go with you to the shrine if you don’t want to go alone,” said my mother.

“What am I going to do there?” I asked.

“Go there I say even for a moment,” she said.

“Do I just go there? What am I to do?” I asked.

“When you enter the shrine, go towards the last clay pot. That is the one that covers the head of your father. It is the last one on your right as you enter. Tell him you have come to greet him and all his ancestors. Ask him to intercede for you in your struggle through life, to assist you in achieving your desires. After that take a bit of the earth around the clay pot and rub it on your chest. It does not take you time to do all of that,” she said. I promised her I would go and do what she had said.

I had not made up my mind to visit the shrine, despite my mother’s entreaties. Two urgent assignments stood foremost on my mind at the moment: the visit to Beyano village to condole with the wives and children of the late chief and the visit to Anya Palace. It was customary in the village to show a sign of concern towards the bereaved family. I had already spent two days in the village without going there and that was already weighing too much on me. The clan became one when the death of a subject was announced and I needed to visit Beyano palace to show solidarity. So I made up my mind to visit Beyano village before visiting Anya palace.

Fourteen

Early afternoon, I was set for the journey to Beyano village. I had planned to hire a motorbike because it was a long journey but the bikes were all busy, carrying farmers to and from their farms in the hinterlands. The sole option left for me was to go on foot. Bombabili opted to accompany me as soon as he got wind of my plans. He told me he had visited the village three times since the disappearance of the chief. As we moved out of Anya and took the road towards Beyano village, we came across people conversing about the recent happenings in the land.

“Dokta, you know what?” said Bombabili. “I almost forget to tell you. The people of Beyano village have decide to revamp the late chief in traditional way. There is a big trouble in that village right now.” The word “revamp” fell in my ears like a bombshell. I tried to decipher its meaning in the context of Bombabili’s speech without making him feel that I didn’t quite understand what he said. He looked at me curiously as if he too doubted my ability to understand him.

“What are Beyano people saying?” I asked, hoping it was a more polite way of understanding the message he was trying to pass across.

“The people of Beyano Village are saying that the chief was not only the children’s father and that he was the father of the whole village. And that they wul bypass those *salopa* children and put a cap on anybody head and carry him to Atemangwat and tell him we have coronate our new chief,” he said. As we moved down the road, he filled me with more information. I asked him questions and he had ready answers on his lips.

The road was broad enough and motorbikes sped up and down the hills heaving terrible rattling noises. Going on foot was even a better option for me because sitting on the bikes and poring down the valleys would have been a frightful

experience. And the way the boys sped with the bikes was as if they had connived with nature to challenge any obstacles to human progress. We walked down the steep hills into the valleys, crossed big boulders on the fatal side of a cliff, turned at a sharp bend leaving the deep gorges on the right then continued down to Aseikung, a crossroad at the lowest point of a valley where three hills met. Standing steep overhead the valley was the Ntentseuh hill. Mbin hill stood opposite and Ntsembeuh, a river reminiscent of its large boulders and rough banks intertwined with trees and weeds meandered at the bottom of the hills and one could hear the noise of the rushing stream from a distance. Where we stood was a short stretch of level land. The river was less noisy and the banks were friendlier to people who went there to perform different activities. There was the Akung hill, all three hills separated by ghastly gorges. All the roads diverged up the hills in four different directions except for the one leading to Atoh which was intercepted by yet other hills.

Stories had it that Aseikung used to be a meeting point for spirits who came from different directions and assembled once every year to celebrate the wonders of the earth in barbaric splendor. It was said that whenever they gathered at the center of the crossroad one could find fresh leaves smeared with blood, an assortment of birds' feathers, quills, broken calabashes and other assortments early the following morning. One could hear the sound of the river rushing downstream, tumbling over the cliffs and cataracts. But where we stood the current was gentle and the giant boulders were resting in the stream. Not much rain was falling at this time of the year and the volume of water had also decreased. I could spot one or two persons upstream, one with conical nets fishing tadpoles and crabs. At that time of the year dried tadpoles were a delicacy in many homes. I walked to the banks of the river and washed my face with the fresh water. It was cool and refreshing, as if I had returned to a new fresh world. I washed my face again and again then I threw the water over my head

and washed it again and again until it seemed that my brain and my whole being had been transformed and my vision became clearer. Cold streaks of water ran down my body as I stood from the stream. Much of my shirt from the collars to the shoulders was wet and the damp cloth clotted on my skin. I had an urge to jump into the stream and lie in it for some time before continuing the journey but Bombabili wanted us to be going. He was itchy to catch up with the latest happenings in Beyano palace. But I needed rest after walking that short tedious distance. There was nothing more alluring than where I stood. I found a boulder near the stream, sat on it and rested for some time while Bombabili continued to tell me about the imbroglia between the people of Beyano village and the children of the late chief. Noticing that I had no intentions of rising and continuing the journey soon, he too found another boulder and sat on it with talk on his lips.

After a while we continued our journey. I found renewed energy trekking as if I had lived in those parts of the land ever since I was born. I walked energetically, my vision became clearer and wider and my thoughts accompanied a buoyancy that raised my spirits. We passed through Tano, through the thick forests stopping by familiar homesteads to greet the occupants. This was a particularly rocky zone. At an extremely delicate rocky path we turned into the forest again and arrived in Tano passing near Abatnwo, the giant boulder that rested on another and a whole big mass of the rock projected over a valley. We stopped there to take some breath viewing one of God's miracles on the surface of the earth. The giant rock lay so loosely that one could think at any moment it would fall off. But it was never falling off. It had been like that from the beginning of time. Beneath it, the earth slanted into a valley and one could see scattered homesteads on the different parts of the hills and valleys. Wild bushes surrounded the rock and several animal noises, birds and other queer noises filled the atmosphere of the mysterious landscape. But there were equally farmlands beneath the rock stretching into the valley. A

woman worked on her farm beneath the rock unruffled. She looked like a little object right down the valley. I feared that a little error could cause me to slide off, crashing down the valley where the woman was working. I had never watched the boulder closely and many years ago I could not think of coming close to it. It was believed that the Rock God lived under the boulders and the priest who had potent powers to hold the rock on that tip of another rock could lose his temper and release it. That could cause a lot of destruction. And sacrifices were offered occasionally to appease the god. I trod cautiously on the path standing occasionally to take a closer look at the miraculous rock, awed by the wonders of nature. This could have been the handiwork of a god, to show humans that besides the blood that flowed in human veins the rocks themselves had inspiring questions about their existence. What struck me most were the farms beneath the rock. But my real fear was not the rock; it was the women who worked down there.

“How did the women or the men ward off fear to farm around the perilous cliff?” I asked not necessarily to Bombabili but simply to express a wonder. Bombabili seemed to have taken that the question was addressed to him and went ahead to explain a number of things.

“The chief and his *bekem* was giving offertory so that the Rock God wul not be annoy,” said Bombabili. “Every year they offer offertory. Every year they dance and dance and kill goats and swines. Then they will make the *ku’ngang* medicine when the big *ngangafu*... the traditional pipu wul meet in the palace to make the *lekat*. The villager bring their farm tool and seed on the last day so that the big *ngangafu* wul bless them. While the women plant the seed in their farm and make prayer for big harvest some seed is plant on the boundary of Lewoh land to chase away bad pipu which destroy the crop,” he explained.

“Do the chief and his notables still offer sacrifices? I see farming still going on,” I said.

“Only one-one time now, not as long time ago before you pipu came and build your juju house and put your own juju in the house. And you pipu force us to burn our jujus. We didn't know what we was doing and we put our jujus in the fire and burn it. Is only after that we know that God was African. Let me tell you again to and fro that God was African. And yet you pipu says that our God was satanical and that our culture was barbarical. And yet we didn't hammer our God on the cross. We didn't beat him to death. You see, we was not barbarical to our God. We show love to our God. That why we offer them sacrifice. We slaughter goat and give them to eat and we give them raffia wine to drink. We give them good raffia wine to drink. But you pipu say that we are satanical pipu.” said Bombabili skipping down from a cliff and landing on a stretch of even earth. I did same after him.

“What happened to your God after you burnt the jujus?” I asked.

“You pipu knows better,” he said.

“But you still perform rituals and offer sacrifices,” I said.

“Why not? We wul not surrender. We have many God, one big one... Fuondem is the big God, and many small God. Small God accommodate in the forest and in the hill like Nyimbong, and in the rock, and in the valley, and in the waterfall like Lebiale. When I hungry I gallivant to the forest and harvest the fruit and eat. When I want to drink water I gallivant to Ntsembeuh and drink water. Why do you think that I should not give goats and palm wine to the God who live in the forest and in the water and the waterfall who give me everything? If I accommodate in the desert, wul I not thank God for giving me so many sands and so many sun lights?” he said as we moved out of the rocky zone and entered the main road. My idea of a universal God became more confused. Could there be a universal God who overlooked the different Gods He created with different climates, landscape and vegetation? Could the Gods of the desert intercede in the problems of those living in

the forests and the hills and valleys? There was something in the crude fellow called Bombabili that tickled the mind.

As he spoke, we moved away from the main road and he led me towards a narrow tract which he said was a shortcut to Beyano palace. He walked ahead skipping over the little gullies and dodging thorny weed still talking. I straggled after him like a child who was just beginning to explore the world and listening closely to what his mentor was saying. We crossed the boulders and came to a big noisy stream which rushed down the cataract in a little hill in a distance. As we went nearer the stream I could hear the noise made by the rushing stream get louder and louder even though I couldn't immediately trace the course of the stream. It was when we were moving over the boulders above it that I understood that it disappeared underground for almost half a kilometer and as we moved further we could hear it rushing downstream again. I also heard some weird noises downstream. At first one would have thought there were people conversing in loud voices. The voices changed and I heard sounds like the noises made by some inexplicable monsters beating the water downstream. The noises became louder and louder and blended with the noise of the rushing stream. It was as if I was having hallucinations. But that was real. An eerie sensation encircled me as we crossed that part of the stream. My hair stood on end and a certain chill raised goose pimples on my body. Bombabili stopped talking and increased his pace, picked his path through while I tried to catch up with him. I had a similar feeling before, passing through that place. Rock piled upon rock and you could hear the noise in the stream but the stream was nowhere to be found.

"This is holy ground," said Bombabili when we had gone a distance away. "We cannot disturb pipu," he said further as if to justify why he suddenly stopped talking. He tried to pick up the last traces of what he was saying but the words were not flowing.

“Those pipu saw us and was talking to us,” he said when we turned away from the stream and started climbing a rough hill.

“Who were the people?” I asked.

“Those people of the underworld who live under the stones, that place called Schwart,” he said. That was the name of the place. I dreaded calling the name myself for fear one of the occupants downstream might think I had evil intensions.

“How do you know they were talking to us?” I asked.

“I know. It is good your eye didn't *parambulate* down there. You wul have see things. And you wul not be able to sleep in the night. We are lucky that our hearts are clean, if not we wul have see trouble. Thank your ancestors we are clean people, not dirty people. That is why many people don gallivant around here,” said Bombabili finding his voice again. At a certain point the track was hardly visible. There were acres of wild forest surrounding the boulders and gave the impression that even farming could not be practiced there freely. Exotic fruits hung from the branches of fruit trees and the birds and squirrels scrambled for them as if they were told the world was coming to an end.

We pursued the forest tract until we came to an opening where the noise of a waterfall became clearer. Lebialem waterfall appeared before us on the other side of the cliff, a ghastly gully separating us. It looked strange and awesome. Towards the southern part of the forest where we stood were extensive cocoa farms that descended to the foot of the waterfall and followed the flow of the river downstream. The height from which the water fell was most breath-taking. It was fed by two big rivers separated at the crest by vegetation and rocks but they reached the same destination at the bottom with noise that was ear-shattering. It was hemmed by thick forests where cocoa farmers had not dared to approach. The water fell from the heights over a precipice, beating and bumping on protruding rocks making tremendous splashes on the rocks on the even land below. It produced voluminous volleys of white

clouds like huge volleys of vapor coming from a great steam in the earth. The whole scene from top to bottom was cloudy, like an endless cascade of rain. My father owned a cocoa farm down there. I pored at the immensity of the landscape in the farthest gully to see if I could have any trace of the farm. I remembered that the noise of the waterfall kept one company in the farm the whole day and you had to talk with your neighbor shouting. What the children were most scared of were the great ponds along the level stretch of land that separated the two hills. We were told that the ponds were home to wizards and only those who identified themselves with the people of the underworld could venture there. The story was told of a European explorer who visited the pond and his camera was seized. On a village market day he met one of the people he had seen in the pond.

“I saw you in Lebiale,” he had said. The next time the European visited the pond the creatures of the underwater caught him, seized his camera, tortured him and warned him never to reveal any information about them again.

We turned away from the waterfall and approached the main road leading to the Beyano palace.

“There are still pipu there. Many of the pipu you see live in those ponds in Lebiale. Some of them, very wicked pipu,” said Bombabili.

We arrived in Beyano village after a long tedious walk. We could see scattered homesteads from a distance, interspersed by forest trees, fruit trees and palm trees. We harvested what we could eat and the invigorating natural nectar of the fruits – oranges, bananas, plums, avocados – were yet not tinged by human experiment. The palace of the late chief was in view. We went down the slope and crossed the spacious courtyard then moved from one house to the other greeting women and men. We spent a little more time in the widow’s houses beginning with the *ngwinkongo*, the first wife of the late chief. She was an elderly woman who received us with colanuts,

inquiring after my family. I expressed my sympathy with the widows, giving token gifts of a thousand francs each for their funeral basket. They were very appreciative and wished me a happy stay in the country.

We crossed the courtyard and went into the *lemoo* where a number of people discussed in high voices. They lowered their voices and answered in depressed tones when we greeted. Inside the *lemoo* were some elders, men and women and the late chief's children. The atmosphere was tense and one could see on their faces the grin of some failed compromise. Silence reigned for some time and while some of the elders gazed on the earth, others occasionally looked into our faces saying nothing. Under normal circumstances they would have been happy to receive us and ask about life and family, especially those whom I had not met since my arrival. I recognized a good number of them. One of them, an ageing man looked very tense and grievous. He looked occasionally on the floor stamping the earth with the staff he was holding. All of a sudden he stood energetically from his seat and went out talking in a grievous tone.

"It can never happen in Lewoh. Not when I still carry this head of mine and see things," he said, flipped his fingers, talked and swore as he moved across the courtyard, then climbed onto the road and disappeared beneath the trees that bordered the palace. Two people left the *lemoo* and went towards the same direction also swearing and cursing.

What I gathered later was that a committee of village elders had met immediately after receiving Atemangwat's orders. The issue was no longer that of the children to decide. They were working towards a way to take control of the late chief's corpse. They could not succeed because the hospital authorities knew only the late chief's children and would not relinquish the corpse to the traditional council of elders. Compromise with the children could not work. The children were then told that the kingmakers were deciding on diverting the throne to another family in Beyano to take control of the affairs of the

village. The elders were not going to allow their village to scorn and ridicule or expose it to the devilry of encroaching neighbors. After all, it was not their father alone who fought for the land. It was the collective effort of Beyano people who could still choose another leader. Despite the threats, the children didn't want to hear anything about the traditional burial of their father. Let old customs and traditions die, they had insisted. They were living in a modern world and they had to do things according to the times. They were no longer to be led by old cultures, heathen and primitive cultures that deprived people of their rights. They didn't want external interference on what was essentially a family matter. They asked the council of elders to return and manage their own homes instead of trying to disrupt the burial program they had made for their father. They had concluded arrangements with the parish priest for a serious requiem mass for their father. That was the reason why the council of elders had left Beyano palace swearing and cursing. What was the world coming to? Children who had not finished sucking their mothers' breast could insult them in plain daylight, telling them to go and manage their own homes? Did going to school mean that children would no longer obey their elders? It was unbearable. Unbearable. They left the palace storming with rage and swearing to bring woe upon the children.

When the committee of elders left, some of their mothers returned to the *lemoo* and blamed the children for being very rude to the elders while some of the women said the children were right to do so. What did cocks have to do with matters that concerned teeth? If they had to crow, they should do so in their own homesteads not in other people's. The children took sides with their mothers and before long, the family was divided into two camps. The issue had become a little tricky. Some of the children were now caught between losing their chieftaincy title and adhering to the dictates of the church. The truth was beginning to resurface and brother stood against brother and mother against mother. In the quarrel, one of the

women revealed that the eldest son who had insisted on the idea of the church burial for his father did so because he knew he could never be made successor. How could he be successor when he was never in good terms with his father? He was now talking about Christian burial when indeed he hid behind the heath to negotiate with some of the elders of Beyano village to twist his father's will to his favor. This unearthing of the underground left the family in disarray. The battle was no longer about whether it was Christian or traditional burial but who was the rightful heir to the chieftaincy throne of Beyano village.

It was toward nightfall when we left, traced our path on the stony road, climbed hills and descended into valleys and climbed again until we were at Anya center where we met a concentration of people. I invited Bombabili for a drink in one of the bars around. The discussion in the air was the death of Fuo Beyano and the imbroglio over his burial. There was history to be told and stories to be retold, each person had his or her own version of the story to give, but all culminated in an unsolved riddle. I listened to their conversations and wanted to listen more. Bombabili was at his best, combining English words in his cherished pattern to express himself. Just coming from the source with fresh information, he forced everyone to listen to him. And truly he had information and argument to present, sometimes with a splitting voice. His analysis of the situation we had just witnessed at Beyano village made issues clearer to me. There is a saying that a fool's story makes a wise man wiser.

Fifteen

The following day I visited Anya Palace. I yearned to know more about what I thought I knew already. Anya palace was the heart of the land, where one could begin to understand the working of the tribe's universe. At the palace plaza I met some of the Prince's retinue and they told me they could not allow me into the inner part of the palace because Atemangwat was holding an important *achemalemoob*. I told them that I wanted to greet the Prince and leave, since I planned to leave the village very soon. They hesitated for a while before one of them opted to go to the Prince to find out if I could be allowed to meet him. I could tell from his outfit that he was a notable. While I waited for him to return, I took a closer look at the palace plaza. That was where most traditional ceremonies took place and the last one I witnessed was the enthronement of the young prince. All the sons and daughters of Lewoh and its neighbors and all the paramount chiefs in Nweh were present. Then it was all festivities and every little spot on the palace plaza was filled with people except the dance arena that lay bare waiting for action. Yet, the population stretched out into the hub of the village because people could not find space in the plaza. Many of them took refuge in bars and drank to the health of the young Prince. I saw dances of antiquity and masquerades that performed possibly once in a life time or only on such occasions. I saw traditional regalia that had been crafted when the villagers were still one with their ancestors. The Prince himself sat in the *nkwochien*, on his throne, solemn and unruffled. He was clad in royal cloth and his little sharp nose and small darting eyes were the only visible parts of his body. I remembered other paramount rulers who came on horse backs and made heroic displays before they were ushered to their seats. There was noise, noise that filled every nook of the atmosphere, the noise

that continued to throb in my brain at the moment the retinue returned. Then it was all quiet again. The whole plaza now looked as if a spell had been cast there and only the birds and some animal noises could be heard in the sacred grove that stood on the right flank at the entrance into the palace. A few people, wearing mostly jumpers and black raffia caps with red feathers tucked to the sides, hurried in and out or stood in little groups discussing privately.

The notable led me into the inner part of the palace. We passed through long passage ways built with earthen bricks, ancient wooden carvings that marked the entrance and the exits, rows of houses on both sides in categories stood behind the *nkwoshien*, some very new as could be judged from the new aluminum roofs. After one row of houses we descended to a lower terrace on which stood another row of houses forming a crescent. It was evident from the direction the man took that we were not going straight to the *mbelelong* where the Prince was presiding. Instead he moved towards one of the new houses with more modern features.

"Is Ngwi-fuo in?" said the notable knocking at the door frame, then he pulled the curtain aside to peep into the sitting room.

"I am," said a youthful female voice from within the house. Not long after, a young lady aged about twenty came out to meet us. She greeted us with so much politeness and invited us in.

In the house, she asked us to sit down and while we did so she went into the inner rooms and came out with a small bowl of colanuts and placed on the side stools besides our seats. It was a new house standing on the extreme corner of the crescent row of houses. The parlor was moderately big with very airy windows shut with louvers. Cushion chairs and a television set which stood at the top of a stand made for the purpose were amongst some of the things that provided the basic comfort of the house and possibly, one of those houses the Prince frequented in ritual hours of the night. From her

looks and the way she set about to usher us to our seats, she must have wondered why I was being brought to her house, whether I had a problem that had to be settled in the palace. I was myself slightly overwhelmed with where I found myself and several questions came to my mind. Was she the Prince's wife or his relation?

"Ngwi-fuo, the Prince has instructed that I bring Dokta here while he looks for an appropriate moment to receive him. Let me join them in the *Mbelekong*. There are pressing issues being discussed," said the notable, rising and leaving the house.

"Dokta, come well," she said, shaking hands with me again, her fairy voice echoing in my brain and sending me into reveries.

"Thank you, Ngwi-fuo. How are you doing?" I said coming back to myself.

"We are doing well," she said, left and returned with *egusi* pudding and beer.

As I ate quietly, it became evident that she was one of the Prince's wives. The man I came with called her "Ngwi-fuo" which means "wife of a chief". She had a soft little mouth flanked by fresh luscious cheeks, her forehead smooth and a pair of black eye lashes settled above her quick darting little eyes. The thick noodles of braided hair flowed generously down on her slim shoulders that formed the crest of her slender build. She wore a *rappa* that cut neatly on her knees and the *buba* rounded at the oval crescent of her heaps. Several *musanga* necklaces and beads caressed her upper chest. Her arms and legs revealed the tender texture of her flesh, still very fresh as if anointed by the milky fingers of her *ndembob*. She wore leather slippers and on the ankle of her right foot was a bangle made from some precious metal. She moved about with such ease and confidence ensuring that I was comfortable. I tried to conjecture how the Prince managed his wives. The Prince, I was told, had twenty wives, fifteen inherited from his father and five young ones whom he married just after his enthronement. The first one was a university graduate and it

was said that she was the first woman to sleep on a leopard's skin with the Prince to begin the initiation rituals for the new ruler. My hostess was much younger. However, from every indication she had mastered the art of home management so well that one could take her for a forty year old woman. She went about briskly, saying very little even when I tried to make her talk. She brought more food and drinks and while I ate she changed the television channel from a local to a European channel. I tried as much as possible to figure out reasons why she preferred a European channel for me. I would have loved the channel she had moved away from and thought I should ask her to return to it. I changed my mind. I thought I should allow her to give me the best of her home art without imposing my cherished patterns on her.

About an hour later, the notable who accompanied me to Ngwi-fuo's house returned to inform me that Atemangwat was ready to receive me.

"Has the *Lefem* ended its session?" I asked.

"No," he said. "*Achemalemoob* has ended and the *Lefem* is just about to start. The issues of the land are never settled like spittle that dries off easily on thirsty earth. He will probably talk with you and let you go before the *Lefem* starts." As we went past the second row of houses on the lower terrace, he orientated me through which door I had to enter the *mbelekong*, how I had to greet and where I had to sit thereafter. He said it was routine for them to caution visitors to the *mbelekong* even regular visitors to the palace who were not notables. We passed through another corridor gorgeously adorned with paintings of dancers and masquerades, monarchical insignia and carvings of warriors; we came out of the corridor and descended towards the *mbelekong*, a massive building located on a raised flat surface at the center of the palace buildings. It was the biggest building in the palace, towering above the other houses. There were huge wooden pillars flanking both sides of the front façade. The pillars were carved from aged wood which had resisted the wear and tear of the ages. On the wood were carved images,

emblems, men carrying hunted animals, women carrying long baskets on their backs strapped with a cord over their heads, and other activities of the clan which the artist carved with crude detailing. The front wall itself was decorated with the masterwork of bamboos from the raffia stems and cultural designs with two doors at extremes on the open front leading to the hall. I was ushered into the hall through the left door which was for non-title holders, the right door reserved for the chiefs and the notables. The interior of the hall was built in the form of a proscenium with major indentations on the rear, flanked on both sides by two wooden pillars on which were carvings, historic bamboo decorations, statues, and other masterpieces of traditional art.

Atemangwat sat on the rear platform, on a raised stool carved with the emblem of the lion on the projected ends of the arms rest. He was flanked on both sides by his Mafuo and Ankwetta. A short distance from the throne were two doors, one at the end of the right wall used by the prince and his wives only; the door on the rear left was for children and young men less than twenty years old. *Bekemalleh* and the kingmakers sat near the Prince and near them some of the Prince's wives. After the doors towards the front were indentations on both verges of the hall. The left flank was reserved for the youths and the elders. On the inner front wall facing the throne were the chiefs who sat according to their ranks and status beginning from right to left. The *bekem* sat on the right wall down towards the door which the Prince used, still in order of their status in the land. The left side of the hall was reserved for the general public. I could gauge the gravity of the issue at stake by the presence of some of the reputed chiefs and notables of the land – Fuo Akeumbin, Fuo Lekongncho, Ndi Nkembecha, Ndi Nkemlegangambong, Ndi Nkemafid....

The Prince was speaking in a stern high pitch when I entered. I waited until he had finished what he was saying, and then I stooped and clapped three times.

“Yieuh!” the Prince answered in his customary way that sounded like the snarl of the lion, looking directly into my face with such questioning authority that I felt uneasy and started wondering whether I had not gone contrary to the tradition of the people. It was when he spoke again that I began to have some confidence.

“Dokta, welcome. Someone show him a seat,” he said. With those instructions, the notables ushered me to a seat on the front row of the popular side. And while I sat on a chair, I marveled at what spiritual forces quickly transformed the easy-going, friendly and humble young man whom I knew before he was enthroned as the paramount ruler of the land, into the majestic, dignifying and authoritative person he was that day.

“Dokta,” said the Prince. Someone made a gesture to me to stand up while Atemangwat spoke to me. I sprang to my feet and stood stiff while he spoke. “I am happy you came to greet the palace. You have always come and before we send greetings to you, you are already gone. But this time you have done well to come even when we are in the heart of a serious matter. It is said a rat mole does not run away during the day without a cause. May I know why Dokta decided today to visit us?” said the Prince.

“Nyangwi, I heard that my fathers and mothers were gathered in the palace and I decided to come and greet them,” I said.

“It surprises me that you made up your mind today to come greet us. Are you sure you have nothing to tell us about what is tearing Lewoh country apart?” said the Prince.

“Nyangwi, I came just to greet since I heard all the leaders of the land are gathered here,” I said.

“Can this be true? I know that you book people are always busy and have no time for village matters,” said the Prince.

“Nyatemeh, people change as they grow up,” said Nkemaleh. “If he has come to greet us today let us welcome and encourage him and other young progressive people to visit

us more often. If not, who will carry the staff of Lewoh culture tomorrow?"

"You did well to come. Sit down and feel at home. The children of Lewoh who travel abroad should always come home and visit the palace, and tell us what new things are happening in the world. Child, welcome to Anya palace. I will be attending to you later. Feel comfortable being part of this discussion. You are not just any kind of person in this land. We can admit you in the *Lefem* even if you are not a title holder. So feel comfortable where you are."

Atemangwat turned away from me and addressed the notables and chiefs.

"Can any ruler in his good senses allow his people to make porridge of him? What are the little things that knock Atemangwat's head?" he asked.

"It is the door post, Nyatemeh, the door post," said one of the chiefs.

"You have spoken with wisdom," said Atemangwat. "But these days it is not the door post. It is you and your children who want to churn me into cocoyam porridge."

Atemangwat sipped the beer from his wooden mug, snarled and clasped his hands. "Fuo Beyano and his children want to hit me on the head. But they must first cut off the head before they do so."

"Nyatemeh, it never can happen, not when the carrier of this womb that delivered lions is still alive," said Ankwetta shrugging her shoulders. Mafuo whispered something in Atemangwat's ears and for some time they concerted in low tones, while the chiefs and the *bekem* watched them curiously.

Sixteen

The matters of *Achemalemoob* had already been settled before I came in. *Achemalemoob* met often to address certain problems or complaints including land disputes, cases of broken homes, witchcraft, debts and problems of inheritance which were reported to the palace. Atemangwat called a Council of Elders made up of the chiefs and the *bekem* to settle the issues. Cases of witchcraft were usually very serious and it took a longer time to arrive at conclusions. Because it was often difficult to prove, persons accused were led to *lefem*, the sacred grove, to swear the *alemnte* if they claimed innocence.

The *Lefem* session started. It was made up of the nine most powerful chiefs and notables in the clan who were capable of dethroning a paramount ruler and naming his successor. They checked the excesses of the ruler without diminishing his authority. In the old days serious matters affecting the land were discussed in the building in the middle of the sacred grove. When resolutions were reached, the members of the *Lefem* swore the *alemnte* to keep the resolutions secret. But with evolving times it seemed some matters could now be discussed in the *mbelekong*. There were other observers, very few of them, most possibly connected to the Beyano village that had some testimony to give. The chiefs were the ones who spoke most of the time. One of the notables clicked his fingers and raised his hand.

“Nyangwi,” he said standing from his seat and addressing the Prince. “It is not that Fuo Beyano and his children want to hit you on the head. Who can hit the lion on the head and go away without the taste of its fangs? The world is changing, Nyangwi and Lewoh country cannot be left behind. If Fuo Beyano’s children want to bury their father in the red man’s way, how does that disturb us? We can allow them do the

burial and we do the traditional celebration after as it has been the case with the other deaths in Lewoh country.”

Before he finished the last statement Fuo Lekongncho clicked his fingers, stood up and adjusted his cap in a way that the red feather pointed from his forehead like an instrument of vision.

“I agree with Ndi Nkemlegangambong that the world is changing,” showing a lot of self-restraint. “The question I want to ask is: is the world changing for the good of our ancestors or for the good of the red man’s ancestors? The chameleon changes the color of its skin but it can never become a lizard. The red man came with his church and he was welcomed. He opened schools and our children went there to learn book and learn their culture. Some of them are big people today, like this my child sitting here who has climbed the sky in an airplane and landed in a foreign country. Today he is back home sitting with us here. We are grateful to the red man for making us know their own culture. But does a man offer you colanuts and take away your wife in compensation?”

“No,” said a number of chiefs simultaneously.

“We cannot allow a foreigner to build his *juju* house in our backyard,” said the chief. Two other chiefs did not agree with the chief who was speaking. There was a sort of controversy that had developed among them and they argued in low tones until Atemangwat hit the table and reminded them that Fuo Lekongncho had not finished speaking.

“See my people,” said Atemangwat, “times have changed. We are coming back to our senses. Our forefathers did not understand the trick played on them by the foreigners. The foreigners were too complicated for them and they accepted them. Today we know better what they did and will no longer allow our tradition to be smeared. We watch the television and listen to the radio. People call that witchcraft. Is that not the witchcraft of other people? Why do you think that our own witchcraft cannot do better things for us? I tell you my people, as our ancestors cautioned let the trap be sensible and so too

the animal. Fortunately our child who is here has travelled to different parts of the world and can tell us better. People in every part of the world are protecting their own *jujju*. Have I lied, Dokta?" I stood clapped three times.

"Nyatemeh can never lie. Nyangwi always speaks the truth," I said. Atemangwat was always right. Even if he had been wrong I could not have said the contrary. But what he said was big talk, an eye opener. People everywhere were protecting their own *jujju*. That was the politics of the world.

"Nyangwi," said Fuo Lekongncho. "Thank you for bringing me back to the issue. The church came and told us to abandon the ways of the ancestors without which we were going to be burnt in hell fire. Were they not the ones who brought the hell fire? We did not know hell fire until they told us. And our ancestors lived happily and left the world happily. We commune with them happily. So where is the hell fire? Fathers and mothers of Lewoh country, our forefathers were wise when they welcomed the church. They still managed to preserve some good old ways of doing things and we cannot completely abandon them today because the world is changing. The baobab cannot be uprooted from the homestead. Let us follow the ways of our ancestors, hide Fuo Beyano and await his return the way our ancestors taught us. I have finished."

He sat down. Each chief stood up and spoke his mind. One or two of the chiefs still showed divided opinions on the matter, arguing in low tones. The Prince sipped his beer then hit the table lightly with his fist. A queer grimace covered his face and his jaws sank in and blew out after each sip of the wine. A notable clicked his fingers, raised his hand and stood up, waited for the chief of the *troh* society to put some order in the hall.

"Nyatemeh, Befuo, Bekem, Mafuo, Ankweta! Give me little space to propose what I think can be done to push this matter aside. The people of Beyano village and the entire Lewoh country are tired of waiting for a solution to this deadlock. It is true that we must not throw away our traditions but we must

not also turn our backs against all the good things the church has done to us. What I will suggest has happened elsewhere in this country and it can still happen. When Fuo Kejeh died, the church celebrated the mass in his palace and after that he was carried to the grave and buried. The priest went and blessed the grave before they started the traditional rites. I attended the funeral and I saw what happened. I have talked with Fuo Beyano's children. We can do the same thing to end the...."

"Abomination!" Fuo Akeumbin cried out, clicked his fingers and stood up. "It happened where? Was Kejeh ever a chief? Did he ever own land as big as my palm? Did he have any land other than where the buildings in his compound stand? Or did he ever manage an ancestral shrine, throw melon seeds on the heads of the dead? Who are his ancestors? Nkemaſid, listen. We are talking serious matters here. Be careful. You have a way of insulting the chiefs. Know that when the finger frequents the anus it will surely carry feces. Nkemaſid, *fad lebeh loub*..." Fuo Akeumbin was so furious that he couldn't say all that was in his mind. I could see him scowling and talking to himself even when he regained his seat. He was the oldest and the most respected of the chiefs. His village was one of the biggest and most populous in the southern forests of Lewoh where most of the farmers, mostly cocoa farmers could boast of wealth and status.

"Nkemaſid," said Atemangwat. "You talk about Kejeh as if you know how he became chief, simply because you attended the funeral. When you squat in the latrine do you know what the penis tells the feces down there?"

"Ha ya! Nyatemeh...", said Fuo Lekongncho rising from his seat then stooping and clapping his cupped hands such that the heavy thud of the palms sounded like a wet drum, "Nyangwi, that proverb carries horns." And while he regained his seat everyone was laughing and commenting.

"Ahem," said another chief, altering his voice in such a way that the others could hardly discern who was speaking, "Nyatemeh, there are women in this hall."

“You mean women who do not know what you are talking about?” asked Mafuo’Ka. “Does any male keep it for himself? If there is any such male let him roast and eat it.”

“We cannot eat it, Mafuo’Ka,” said Fuo Lekongncho. “We know who the real owners are. We are only caretakers.” There general murmuring interspersed with laughter until the Prince spoke again.

“Proverbs are like bones; you crack them if you want to eat the marrow,” said Atemangwat, picking the thread end of his speech. “Nkemafid, you attended the funeral and you were given pork to eat. Did you know what was happening down there in his compound?”

“Who does not know Nkemafid?” said Fuo Akeumbin. “He has eaten money from the church and eaten money from the children. Now he wants to throw confusion in the land. That is his trade and we know that very well.” Nkemafid tried to talk but the chiefs hushed him down. He was not speaking what could help solve the problem. They reminded him that it was purely a matter for chiefs and not notables, chiefs who owned land and knew the pains when one of their subjects had a problem. What had a hen got to do with matters that concerned teeth? Each chief stood and spoke his mind drawing examples from the past and what had become of tradition. Lewoh people, they said, were fast losing their shadow because the laws of the land had been thwarted for too long and it was time to start protecting those laws, ensuring that the very nerve and soul of the land was secure.

“Aheem!” the young Prince grunted. It was such a deep heavy grunt that one of the chiefs who had stood up to speak in favor of the church gently lowered himself and sat back in his seat. There was solemn silence before Atemangwat spoke.

“Fathers and Mothers of the land, you are the eyes, the ears and the brains of Atemangwat. I would be nothing if you were not there to counsel me. You have all spoken and said many things. But still we are not finding a headway in this matter. We agree that the church is our partner and shall continue to be so.

But we will never allow foreigners to build their *juju* house in our backyards. Lewoh culture and its traditions have to be protected without which we cannot talk of the nerve and soul of our land. I too went to school, educated by the church. But must the tortoise cast away its shell and become the lizard?”

“Achiabieuh, it cannot. The tortoise cannot become a lizard,” said one of the chiefs.

“You all know the story as our mothers told us: The lizard once told the tortoise: ‘Friend, I am always travelling out into the forest and I have seen the light. But each time I come back I always see you on the same spot. I have brought you a new idea. Let me break that shell on your back and liberate you so that you too can travel into the forest and see the light of the world. Times have changed and you can no longer carry your house along with you. You will never see the light of the forest.’ And the tortoise replied: ‘Friend, if I cast off my shell I shall no longer be called a tortoise. I shall look like a lizard without a tail. It is better to remain where I am than to walk fast in the forest. If the world turns, it turns around me and I see everything where I lie.’ Countrymen, let us be wise like the tortoise. We can no longer be called Lewoh people if we cast aside customs. We have been deliberating on this matter for long and it is time to take a decision. All the nine members of the *Lefem* are present here. They have spoken with wisdom and I have listened to them. There is no need to count heads because the majority of them are thinking just the way I am thinking too. The laws and customs of Lewoh were not made today. They were made by our forefathers a long time ago and they knew what they were doing. Listen, the woodpecker is never small in its hole. Fuo Beyano’s great grandfather was one of the earliest chiefs to settle in the land. He fought and conquered territory from Leki and we cannot now say that we will allow strangers to bury him. Where will he meet his ancestors? Who will appease his ancestors when things go sour in Beyano village? Will the church perform the traditional rites that will permit him to travel to the ancestral world? Will the

church catch his successor and perform the rites that will link him with his ancestors and give him the benevolence of a good ruler? There is much wisdom in the ways of ancestors and we cannot now allow Leki people to take back our land. We shall practice tradition as our forefathers designed it, no more pulling of the cord with the church on an issue which is as clear as this one. Nyontsembeng...”

“Nyangwi,” answered one of the notables, coming forward. Atemangwat tilted his head towards Mafuo’Ka and whispered something in her ear. They conferred for a while then Atemangwat sat upright and called out again.

“Nyontsembeng, you will go with the *trob* to Beyano Palace, beat the drum and tell the children of Fuo Beyano and the people of Beyano village that I have instructed that Fuo Beyano be brought to *Lefem* Atemangwat where we shall direct him how to travel to his ancestors. If this is not done before nightfall tomorrow, *Lefem* Atemangwat will crown another person as the custodian of Beyano land and its people. Go now before darkness covers your path,” Atemangwat said. When the notable left the hall with a couple of other persons, Atemangwat sipped his beer and grunted occasionally, the kind of grunt that confirmed the satisfaction of a worthy decision taken to get through a tough problem.

“Nyatemeh, you have spoken with the wisdom of our ancestors,” said Fuo Lekongncho.

“Nyatemeh,” said Mafuo. “A pig does not know the value of its snout until there is a wound on it. We, women, have to help our children to do the right things. I have talked with *ngwinkongo* Fuo Beyano and she tells me that although the children are thinking otherwise, their mothers are in the bushes scheming to secure the throne. Who does not like to become the mother of a chief?” Mafuo’Ka spoke in a very determined voice, with a kind of assertiveness which even chiefs did not dare to express in the presence of Atemangwat. And she spoke on, with politeness, honoring the presence of the male folk yet with decisive insistence. One might have thought that she

could usurp the position of the paramount ruler. She was the ruler's aunt who was known over the land as Mafuo'Ka. She was the woman husband the womenfolk fondly referred to as, Mafuo'Ka our husband, because she was married to three wives in accordance with traditional laws and customs. She owned a big homestead which had a familiar set-up of a chief's palace in which she lived with her three wives and numerous children delivered by her wives. Her maiden name was Akawung, named after one of the most prominent heads of the Lewoh ruling dynasties. It was said that if she had been a male child she would have been the most suitable heir to the throne. When she was crowned with the chieftaincy title of "Mafuo", a key member of Atemangwat's cabinet, both in the former and current dynasties, she became popularly known as "Mafuo'Ka, a shortened form of Mafuo Akawung."

"Can the tadpole say it does not like jumping when it knows it will develop legs one day?" asked Mafuo'Ka. "Nyatemeh, you have spoken with the wisdom of the ages."

Speech after speech followed to complement the Prince's decision. He whispered to his Mafuo and stood up. Mafuo'Ka too stood up. He called two chiefs and his Ankwetta and they followed him out of the hall through one of the rear doors. It was quite some time before they returned. While he discussed with his immediate entourage, the chiefs and the *bekem* too talked in low tones within their groups. Food and drinks were brought into the hall. The aroma of goat meat and pepper-soup tickled my senses. And when the big pot in which the meat was stored was opened, I could see vapor steaming out of it. There was also a jug of raffia wine, crates of beer, wine and whiskey. It was already dark outside. I could hear the children in the palace playing hide and seek not far from the hall and the sound of a woman pounding fufu in a nearby house. I thought I could leave but it was not polite for me to go without the authorization of the Prince. He had promised to talk with me after the session. I sat back in the chair and watched the chiefs

and the notables eating and talking in low tones. I wondered whether they were still talking about Fuo Beyano's burial.

Atemangwat left the *mbelekong* with his Mafuo and Ankwetta and his retinue. Shortly after, a waiter came to me to inform me that Atemangwat wanted me to meet him in a reception room near the *mbelekong*. He led me through the dark passages between houses with faint flickers of light filtering through the windows and ushered me into a small hall of antique architecture, possibly the earliest conception of a palace reception hall in the land. Its dark grey shades blurred much of the dignity of the hall to the point that one could not easily notice the presence of the ruler. It was his grave and dignified voice that alerted me of his presence and drew my attention to a little dais at the far end of the hall where the throne was raised. He was sitting with one of his wives. And when I looked closer I realized that she was the young pretty woman who had received me in the afternoon. She was sitting close to him and caressing him gently on the arm.

"Dokta," he said, his voice sounding like the snarl of a leopard. "Someone should show him a seat. These book people are not used to these kind of places," he said and then laughed like a storm. I was ushered to a seat close to the dais from where I could see him very closely. The table in front of him was set with food and drinks. Another table was also set with plates where I sat. The women served the Prince and then me. As we ate and drank, the Prince occasionally asked me about my trip to the United States. He too ate with a voracious appetite. It was the first time I was seeing a paramount ruler eating. As tradition demanded, they never eat in public.

"Dokta, welcome back from America. I often wonder how you feel when you visit that great country and return to this world of our ancestors," he said.

"Nyangwi, I feel very much at home. My ancestral root is the best place in the world," I said. My answer was intended not to console myself but the Prince. For me it was a rambling world. And every world is the way one creates it and every life

is the way one lives it. The better and the best and the worse and the worst are all worlds which people create and live in. For me the world and life depended on the meaning one could create of their cherished values. So too, for the Prince. I could conjecture that by seeing me, his imagination probed into distant places with amazing experiences, his imagination carried him along with me to illusory worlds.

“True,” he said. “The woodpecker’s hole is its best home in the world. It roams in the forests but always returns to its hole. You teach at the university.”

“Yes, Nyatemeh.”

“Have you married another wife?”

“Nyangwi, I am still searching.”

“The gods will guide you to find one. A man does not stay for long without a wife. He will be cheating the gods,” he said, his voice sounding like the sound of a storm. “You have to get married again as soon as possible. A man stands firm on the ground when he adds his wife’s feet to his. Look for a wife as soon as possible. You have a good position in the outside world and we cannot think that you are of no consequence in Lewoh land. But you cannot sit in the council of elders as you sat in the *Lefem* today and talk about other people’s homes when you are not married yourself.” The Prince was brief and to the point. I felt guilty. My education seemed to simmer off me considering that my society rejected me because I could not fulfil an obligation.

“Go and think over the matter. If you do not know where to find a wife, come to the palace. There are people here who will lead you to fertile homes.” He said and continued talking with his young wife. I was led out of the hall and onto the plaza by a servant, from where I went back to my father’s compound.

Seventeen

When Nyontsembeng returned to Anya palace and recounted all that was going on in Beyano village, the young Prince was confronted with another major task, to know who the rightful successor was. He sent Nyontsembeng back to Beyano village to find out the person to whom the late chief had told his will. Nyontsembeng came back with word that Nkemaſid was the keeper of the will. Atemangwat summoned Nkemaſid to the palace with emergency, suspicious of the information Nkemaſid confided in him. He heard later that an older child of the departed chief was suspected to have gone behind the back to influence the village elders to twist the will to his advantage. He was a rich businessman in Douala and Atemangwat wondered that a child who had constant problems with his father, incited by his mother, could now be the favorite child on his father's deathbed. Maybe the chief had changed his mind because he needed a wealthy son to take care of his palace. But that was a foolish decision. It was wisdom and not wealth that governed a palace. The river current could never have favored the stones and carried away the tadpoles. Besides the son was old enough to have written his own will. Could it happen that a successor was already known by the public when the catching ceremony was yet to come?

Atemangwat summoned his *trohndii*, some kingmakers and Mafuo'Ka to a private session in the *Mbelekong* to investigate the issue. The question of succession in Beyano village needed to be handled with care. There were persistent rumors that Nkemaſid had twisted the will to favor the eldest son. Nkemaſid stood his grounds, swearing that he had the will and would only say the words of the departed chief. The kingmakers tried to coax him to speak the truth to no avail. I was at Anya palace the following morning when Nkemaſid was

summoned again. One of the kingmakers suggested that I should be asked to leave the *Mbelekong* before the issue was discussed.

“Leave Dokta alone,” said the Prince. “If you are afraid that he will discover the dishonesty you people are practicing in Lewoh, then I agree with you that he should leave. If this is not the case, allow him to participate in everything the palace is doing. The gods are not drunk to send him towards us. When he visited the palace this morning did he know you had been summoned? You should have been asking yourselves why this man who always comes to the village and hurries away as if the village carried a plague should stay longer this time and frequent the palace so often,” the Prince said, cleared his throat and continued. “Nkemafid,” there is something worrying about the succession of Fuo Beyano. You are keeping the words of the chief but the gods of Lewoh tell me that a shadow may be standing in the place of the substance. And you know the consequences.”

“Prince of the land, can I belie that which was confided in me in good faith? What are the little things that disturb our ruler?” said Nkemafid. “Nyatemeh. I am keeping Fuo Beyano’s words. We were very good friends and he did not only give me his words, he put me in charge of his palace until his return.”

“Nkemafid,” said Mafuo’Ka, “Remember the curse of the womb and speak your truth. Is the person you told us the one Fuo Beyano asked to sit on his stool?” There was a brief silence. The curse of the womb was the most terrifying curse for any male. “Nyatemeh,” said Mafuo’Ka. “There is not much time left and yet many things to be done. To shorten the matter, may I plead with your majesty that Nkemafid either swears the *alemnte* or faces the curse of the womb?”

“There is something worrying about the succession,” said the Prince. “We should know the truth and we have only one source of truth. That is from the gods of our ancestors. I shall go with you and the kingmakers and *trobndii* to the *Lefem* and you will speak the truth to them. You will say just what Fuo

Beyano told you to say when he traveled to meet his ancestors. He will be there himself listening to what you will say. And when you have said it you will swear *alemnte*. Whatever you shall choose to say there beware of the curse of the womb or the wrath of the gods,” said Atemangwat. Nkemaſid was silent and Atemangwat continued. “Nkemaſid, know that when the gods want to turn you into a lunatic they begin by swelling your appetite for free things. We shall go to the sacred grove so that you swear the *alemnte*. After that we will take your words and execute them to end this long row which is almost destroying Fuo Beyano’s palace”. Nkemaſid remained quiet. “Nkemaſid, think well before we go,” said the Prince. Nkemaſid stood speechless for some time, and then cleared his throat.

“Achiabieuh,” said Nkemaſid. “If a man leaves his words with another man before traveling to the world of the ancestors one must be careful the way he chews his mouth. Nyatemeh, I will go and reconcile with my *ndembob* and I will be here very early in the morning. He stooped, clapped his hands and left the *mbelekong*.

“Where is the world going to?” said Atemangwat after Nkemaſid had left the hall. “What is this *panama* that has eaten into the heart of the land?”

The rumors were now open stories. Fuo Beyano’s children became more and more divided threatening to yank off one another’s head. Their mothers sided with them and Beyano people themselves were divided, fuelling the flames of discord amongst the children and their mothers. And for all this, one man stood accused. He was Nkemaſid. Many did not understand why an experienced and renowned chief like Fuo Beyano could make the error to confide his words with a man whose deeds in the land were always questionable. Was it not Nkemaſid who attended a funeral and crowned a notable without the knowledge of Atemangwat?

Nkemaſid returned to Anya palace early the following morning, the day after he had asked to go and consult with *ndembob* his Creator. Atemangwat took him away to a corner in

the *mbelekong* where no one, even his Mafuo, Ankwetta or Ngwinkongo could overhear their conversation. They were very brief. Nkemafid left and then returned the following morning and went with Atemangwat, the *troh-ndii* and the kingmakers, into the sacred grove where the *Lefem* sometimes held its sessions on crucial matters of distrust. It was a brief session after which Atemangwat sent the *troh-ndii* and the kingmakers to Beyano village to quell the tension that was building up day and night.

The removal of Fuo Beyano's corpse from the Africa Mission Hospital was scheduled for *Alena*, the day after the Lewoh Market day. The day was carefully chosen in order that it did not go contrary to the laws of the land. Lewoh, like most clans in Nweh had eight days a week. Of the eight days, there were four good days and four bad days. The good days included *Alena*, *Anzoah*, *Amina* and *Alung* which were days that traditional ceremonies including funerals, death celebrations, marriages and birth ceremonies could be performed. The bad days were *Afa'ah*, *Angong*, *Aseih*, and *Ankoah* on which no ceremonies could take place. *Ankoah* especially was the spiritual day of Lewoh. It was a day reserved for communing with the gods and ancestors of the land. On this day the whole land was quiet. People worshipped their household gods and communed with their ancestors, consulted with their *ndembob*. They were forbidden to work, dance, play drums or engage in activities that had to bring people together. Even if Atemangwat disappeared on that day no alarm was to be raised until late in the evening.

When I went to sleep that night, my mind loitered between my trip abroad and my sojourn in the countryside. The two worlds lay open in front of me like two pages of a book split on the spine: the imbroglio Lewoh country was facing and memories of the search for my brother in America. I felt a lot of pain thinking about my mother and her concern about her son. My mother was no longer interested in what was

happening in Lewoh country. I heard her sigh several times and I could understand the issues which pressured her. She was already complaining that her son was dead and I had refused to tell her the truth. She asked if there was anything wrong in telling her the truth. If she had known the truth she would have long mourned and forgotten about him. She believed it was the *ndob* of the ancestors that had gripped the household. It was my father's anger on him and the rest of his kindred who had abandoned those who rested in the earth.

Eighteen

I had not found any trace of my brother since I arrived the US. We had toured New York, visited Massachusetts and New Hampshire and there was no hint of him. The scheduled trip to New Mexico provided another opportunity for me to continue my search. This was just wishful thinking because I had been told in New York that there weren't many blacks living in that part of the country. I left all to providence, some ultimate necessity could have pushed anyone to that part of the world just as I was about to visit New Mexico with the group. I gave myself hope and I was very determined in my search. If he were dead, I would want to know because relations back home expected me to return with information about him.

The trip to New Mexico was to last for six days. The pilgrims were to visit strategic sites in Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Taos which were chiefly indigenous communities of American Indians. Three minivans were stationed in front of the Palladium as early as 6 a.m. and by 6.30 a.m. the pilgrims were conveyed to La Guardia Airport. At that early hour the airport was flooded with people; pink, red, red-brown, brown, brown black, and black faces. It was like a beehive with bees moving in some inexplicable circumlocution. Meiriv collected the pilgrims' passports and soon returned with flight tickets and boarding passes stuck in each one of them. I was amazed with the order and ease with which things were done, hundreds or even thousands of people were served with such facile dexterity. The check-in was also rapid but rigid in spite of the long process. Hand baggage was sent through the scanning machine. The pilgrims were asked to remove their shoes and belts and to empty whatever metal objects they had in their pockets in a basket. And while the basket was sent through the scanner, the pilgrims passed through a screening door. A little

delay came when after scanning the hand baggage, two members of the group were invited for special random screening. Joda and Tugu followed the security officers to a corner and their hand baggage was opened and every detail in them was searched. We were made to understand later that special random screening was done since September Eleven. No particular persons were targeted. On the spur of the moment any person was invited for the exercise.

We stood in a group waiting for them to go through the process. Joda was very angry. He did not understand why he should be selected for screening out of many others. Even the explanation given by the airport security officer didn't seem satisfactory to him. The question was why him and not some other person.

"I hope Ken hasn't been detained," said Lebanajjar.

"You didn't plan to detain him, I suppose?" retorted Meiriv.

"He's unwisely controversial. That's what I mean," said Lebanajjar.

"He speaks his mind, which to me is most commendable. He ain't wayward like most of y'guys," said Meiriv. "Hey guys, let's move on. The others are waiting for us and we're almost late," she said and led the way to the gate where we submitted our boarding passes and boarded the flight. I listened to the short exchange between Lebanajjar and Meiriv and made up my mind not to say anything. Lebanajjar was already teasing me too much but I understood that he had his own complexes and needed someone to hang on.

We landed at Alabama to take a transit flight to Albuquerque. We couldn't move immediately as planned because the scheduled flight had technical problems. After three hours it was only possible for two-thirds of the pilgrims to board the next flight. The rest of the group was to follow in the next flight. I was among those who boarded the first flight. We arrived in Albuquerque late in the afternoon and because of the flight delay and also because part of the group had been

left behind we could not visit the golden old ghost town, Madrid, where we were to meet with the artist community as planned. We drove straight to Santa Fe, made a brief tour of the town and went to Hilton Hotel for accommodation formalities. The other group arrived after midnight, noisy and boisterous.

The following morning we undertook a historic tour of Santa Fe. It was a peculiar city with peculiar architectural designs. Most of the buildings were low-slung buildings made up of a mixture of dried earth and straw, about the size of huge earthen ovens mostly of two or three floors with flat roofs and tiny windows tagged on the clay walls. At the center of the city were shops of gorgeous artistic ornaments, necklaces, bangles, earrings, sleeve-cuffs, watches, cowboy outfits and a variety of objects of decoration displayed through the windows and on paved floors on some verandas. Also displayed were carved or smithened statues of men and animals and other artistic symbols representing some mystical phenomena. The whole town looked like a museum. I was fascinated by the beauty of the town, a beauty forged by the generosity of the imagination, a carnival of artistic excellence welded together to produce in a refined taste, the disparaging elements of the universe. The town's clay houses with refined and polished walls looked like fortresses; the ancient carvings of their ancestors only affected by a tinge of modernity, the reserve of ancient life was still evident in its art and architecture. I observed the men and the women turn the objects over and over, buying jewelry and wishing they could buy more. It kept occurring to me that to create is divine and to be divine is to create, the ultimate mission of the artist being to create beauty out of chaos. The indigenes themselves and the whole artistic community looked artistic. They were stout, slightly bulky, of red brown color, with flat nostrils and thick flat faces often wrinkled up, casting suspicious and surreptitious looks with very little steam or verve for life in them. At the sight of some of the people my brother's image came into my mind. I had not seen any black

man since we arrived the town. I wondered if any attempt to trace my brother there could make any sense. I was told the people of Santa Fe were the Native Americans, the aboriginal inhabitants of the land.

That afternoon, in the conference room of Hilton Hotel, we met Maiara Tamaya, an Assistant Professor who was scheduled to brief us on Native American life. She was a middle aged woman with a fleshy, wrinkled face and sunken looks which made her look older than she perhaps was. She talked to us about Indian religious beliefs and education, refusing to answer questions related to the status of the Native Americans in the sociopolitical setup of the United States and questions which attempted to poke deep into the religious beliefs of the people. I observed Maiara and her companion with quiet empathy and felt overwhelmed even after the pilgrims later met at the poolside of the hotel for supper. Maiara's looks and tone continued to force their imprint on the mind, with the expression of some profound mystery in her being, some *wahala* that she and her race had borne with stigma from the beginning of time or from some inexplicable accident in history when something terrible happened; something terrible for which they needed an apology or were waiting for the spirits and the gods of the land to make a special declaration, take a special action; to give a special benediction which their entire nation hoped to achieve through belief, ritual and art.

The image of Maiara Tamaya still clung to my mind the following morning when we left for a tour of the cliff dwelling located at the Bandelier National Monument where some indigenous American Indians had lived some seven hundred years before. We scrambled up and down the hills, entered the caves and shrines looking very much like prehistoric people. In the afternoon we went to Santa Clara Pueblo, and later to Los Alamos, passing through extensive semi-arid land, with rough topography. Giant boulders lay challengingly on the surface of the earth, on the barren casualties of the hard brown chalk of

volcanic waste and its snow-shaped cliffs as if nature herself was a fatal artist. Los Alamos was a calm location, the very antithesis of its own production; the very antithesis of a Far East hemisphere sweating with the horror that it initiated. Yet a sense of guilt hung on the face of the clouds on the even shores of its eastern mountains; yet the triumph of world peace at a monstrous cost glistened on the rough slopes of its western horizons.

The following day we drove to Chimayo, visiting the El Santuario de Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas, a small church credited with magical and miraculous healing powers that served the local Spanish community. I tried to unravel the mystery that cast a spell on an artistic race. When we arrived in Taos I felt somehow relieved. We were lodged at Kachina Best Western Hotel. Most of the rooms were occupied and many of the pilgrims were paired up at the discretion of the staff that took us round. I had the privilege, like a few others to be lodged in a single room. After a barbecue dinner at the hotel we were invited to Sagebrush Inn to dance Country Western Music. It was a charming inn with a touch of history and a splendid art collection exhibited in the whole setting. Its large grass courtyard, with elm trees dotted here and there and its old lounge with rustic wooden dance floor was a great place for dancing live music.

We drank wine and beer and I watched the townsfolk with admiration. They wore their cowboy outfit of large bowler hats, white long-sleeved shirts, and close-fitting pantaloons tugged in long leather boots. They danced to the rhythm of country music issuing from a live band on a little platform at the north end of the bar. The platform was separated from the sitting area by a wide open floor where the dancing took place. I was excited being in the land of the famous cowboys. I used to be a good admirer of cowboy films when I was a child. During our hide-and-seek games, we acted like cowboys. And I could imagine some of the scenes in which cowboys rode on horsebacks chasing or escaping from some woe or tribulation.

The semi-arid landscape on which the horses sped raising dust became more realistic and reminded me of my college days when being able to talk about “Western” referring to cowboy films was an indication that one was current with civilized trends. As an adult I came to like Country Music for its inspirational tone and soul-searching mood. That evening I was listening to the music live, watching the musicians bleeding country melody and the townsfolk, the gentlemen and their ladies, hand in hand, in the melodious galore paraded the dance floor with ritualistic tempo.

It was a moment of ecstasy. The music and alcohol stimulated my nerves and I felt a strong urge to dance. But I didn’t want to disturb the civilized pilgrims. I strolled to the floor and started dancing alone until Shizuka stepped by and danced with me. I didn’t care whether I danced the right pattern or not. Shizuka too wasn’t bothered either. To me the point was not dancing rightly or wrongly. It was celebrating life and the rhythm of the music dictated the pace of life while the dancing ignited the spirit in one’s body. When the song ended, Shizuka held me tight and looked into my face.

“Please Ken, another song,” she said hastily and determined. I heeded to her request and we continued dancing the next tune. This time I tried to be more perfect, more confident and more inventive. The tune ended, I moved away from the floor to sip some beer, Shizuka also went to her seat. Frances who had been watching us closely intercepted me midway.

“Ken, let’s dance this one,” she said as a new rhythm was introduced. I went back to the dance floor. Holding me loosely on the tip of my fingers, she said, “Ken, I don’t dance well, so you will bear with me”. There was no time for excuses. The music was playing and the ambience was taking a sharp turn towards greater delight. No time to receive complaints. People just had to dance. I held Frances in my arms and steered her around on the glistening wooden floor. We roved to a somber part of the hall and danced quietly. She held me tight, so tight

that I feared she could squeeze me out of life, her cold nose leaning on my cheek and her warm breath falling on my neck. I could feel her heart beat very fast and once or twice her torso shivered lightly. I remembered the incident in Deering when she had interrupted the flow of life in me while I danced with Grisse. That ecstatic moment which she, Frances, had interrupted caused me to lose the gleam I had gathered that evening.

“I’m tired,” I said releasing my hold of her.

“You don’t mean it,” she gasped letting loose her grip. I went to my seat and gulped down some mouthfuls of beer and I was soon happy again dancing with other people, interacting freely, emotionally, and uncensored.

Sagebrush Inn was a pleasant world in which melody shattered all barriers, except for Lebanajjar and Dos Santos who were not dancing. At about midnight, Lebanajjar invited Kanadia for a dance and Dos Santos joined them. As they danced, Dos Santos held Lebanajjar so tight from the rear while Kanadia held Lebanajjar too from the front. Lebanajjar squeezed himself in and out between the two people with domineering influence, and then concentrated on a dance with Dos Santos spinning him round, occasionally embracing him and issuing a brief kiss. Kanadia tried to gain the attention of Lebanajjar while dancing on her own and when she did not succeed she turned round briskly and with quick determined strides she came out into the open light and slumped into a seat. Her cream pink face had turned purple and she fixed a hard stare on the top of the table in front of her. Lebanajjar and Dos Santos set about parading the floor, jamming on other dancers, stepping on legs, and pushing other couples. Noticing that Lebanajjar was creating disorder, Meiriv announced that it was time to go. Everyone wished to stay a little longer but they had to leave and prepare for the next day. As we stepped out of the inn the trio stood at a corner. There seemed to be some disagreement between them and I could hear Kanadia’s sharp,

angry but low tone rebuking Dos Santos as I moved towards the minivan.

“Can’t you just let me hav’im tonight?” Kanadia screamed in a low tone.

“I need him. So why should I let him off to you?” said Dos Santos.

“And you getting’m all the time? Why don’t you just let me have him tonight?” Kanadia said before stepping into the minivan.

At the hotel, Lebanajjar came to me to negotiate the possibility of my going to spend the night with his roommate so that he and Dos Santos could spend the night in my room.

“I’m expecting a guest,” I said.

“Hunh! A guest? From where?” he asked

“From Africa,” I said.

“I can’t believe you. A girlfriend...a boyfriend?” he asked.

“A girlfriend. She’s a spirit woman...mami-water...coming straight from Africa to spend the night with me,” I said.

“Are you just kidding?” he asked emphatically, then as he went away he said grumbling: “The African won’t understand”.

Of course, the African won’t do things like that, I told myself. The African won’t betray nature.

There were a number of places to tour in Taos before departure to New York. The following day after breakfast we went to Taos Pueblos, one of the indigenous villages on the outskirts of Taos, a short distance away from the tarred road. Led by a guide, we passed by an expansive graveyard at the entrance of the village enclosed in a low mud brick wall. Wooden crosses were planted at the top of the graves in disarray and on them hung pieces of black, red and white cloth and other objects like snail shells and little dummies. At the middle of the graveyard was a tall huge oblong structure like a tomb. Overlooking the graveyard and village was a high broad mountain with multiple summits that blocked part of the blue sky on the far side of the horizon.

The village was abandoned. Apart from two or three natives who moved about, most of the natives as we were told, had locked themselves indoors. A few who opened their doors had artistic objects for sale. They, like the indigenes in Santa Fe, bore the same expressions of inquietude. The village and its people looked like the very basis of primal earth without electricity and pipe-borne water. Their houses were of a simple rural kind compared to the more urbanized architecture in Santa Fe. There was a chain of giant anthill-like structures built with clay, supported with wooden stakes, of varying heights, sizes and patterns bound to one another in the form of a hemicycle with little openings for doors and windows here and there. In front of the hemisphere was a large central arena of earth, separated in the middle by a stream and linked to other parts of the hemisphere by two or three narrow wooden bridges. We were warned not to stray into unauthorized quarters, not to cross this bridge or that, not to look upstream and the like. While the guide explained a few things about the Taos Pueblos people, a fellow on horseback in some little bush behind us warned us not to look in his direction because he was performing a ritual.

We drove to the Millicent Rogers Museum and later to the Wild Rivers recreational Area northwest of Questa. We hiked eight hundred feet down the great canyon, exploring what looked like an island until we arrived at the tributary of the Twin Rivers. It had rained heavily down the valley and most of us were wet. When we returned to the minivan Frances refused to sit near Tugu which was their original sitting position before we arrived at the museum. Besides, the jewelry he had bought for his wife at Taos Pueblos and left on the seat in a black polythene bag before hiking down the valley could not be found. I told him to report the matter to Meiriv but he was reluctant to do so, fearing that he might be taken for a liar. I laughed at him and told him to remain quiet until he returned to his country in Africa. Why would anyone think he was lying when he could not find his wife's jewelry where he had left it?

He had to make this known or just shut his mouth until he returned to his country. He mustered courage and complained to Meiriv and the atmosphere was filled with uneasy calm when Meiriv made an announcement concerning the missing jewelry. Even after we returned to the hotel, many persons didn't take Tugu seriously. On the evening of the following day, he told me he had found the jewelry and that Bill and Meiriv had called him to the office and handed it to him, apologizing on behalf of Chilia who had mistakenly picked the little black polythene bag containing the jewelry. Some deep reflection had brought her to her senses and she had handed the jewelry to Bill asking for apologies and pleading with them to keep the matter secret. We kept it secret but I kept asking myself if any of the pilgrims would ever believe Tugu was speaking the truth.

As we explored New Mexico, it became increasingly evident that the American Indians were undergoing some spiritual or worldly *wahala* for which they held someone to blame, someone who had committed treason against their being and nation and the whole race was made to endure the verdict and the wrath of an unknown deity that watched them from the summit of the mountain overlooking their settlement. Could it be that someone was talking boastfully at the center while at its world's rejected end another was nursing bitter grudges? I rubbed my eyes, then buried my face in my palms. I didn't realize when the minivan stopped in front of the hotel in which we were lodged. I was tired with the world. I asked myself over and over what this world was all about. Who could expressively define what the world was? Who could explain the eternal wrangling between the rich and the poor, the whites and the blacks, the almighty and the non-mighty? I had seen the rich and the poor people, seen all colors of people; those of the esteemed race, the blacks, the brown, the pink, the dark brown the light brown.... I had seen buildings rise up to the limits of the sky and others as simple as clay. I had seen people who talked loud and boastfully and others who passed unnoticed. So, who could give me a clearer definition of the

universe? I felt some pain at the back of my mind even when I went to bed. I struggled to brush off the dilemma that hung on it. It would not go off until at some point after midnight, sleep rescued me.

Nineteen

The minivans were parked in front of the hotel ready to convey us to Albuquerque Airport where we had to take a flight to Atlanta then transit to New York. I put my baggage in the boot and took my place near the shutter behind Alejandra. She sat behind the steering wheel, adjusting her seat, fidgeting with items on the dashboard. Meiriv came round our bus, surveyed the passengers.

“Two persons aren’t here,” she said, went away briefly and returned with a list. “Lebanajjar and Kanadia aren’t here. What’s happening with these two guys?” she asked. I could see the stress on her face when she leaned on the bus and supported her chin with her hand. She took out her mobile phone dialed a number, held the phone on her ear, listened then dropped her hand in utter frustration.

“Did anyone see Lebanajjar and Kanadia?” she asked, her voice sounding as if there was a lump in her throat. She leaned on the car again and peered on the ground. I could see her reddening face turn sour and sunken. Missing the flight at Albuquerque was going to be a very painful experience. Shizuka and Alejandra met Meiriv and all three went back into the hotel. It was well after twenty minutes that the ladies returned all red, agitated and complaining. They were followed by Lebanajjar and Kanadia. While Kanadia walked with uncertain steps, her face sullen, she bore the expression of one who had just survived the wrath of a ravisher; Lebanajjar came on trying to look confident, talking with Meiriv as they approached the van.

“Spending all your life in the restrooms and keeping others waiting? We’ve to move from restroom to restroom looking for y’guys? We’re almost missing the flight. I mean, this isn’t serious,” said Meiriv, ushering them into the van.

“Never mind, Meiriv, it happens at times,” said Lebanajjar.

“Never mind what? I mean, this isn’t serious,” said Meiriv.

“Never mind, Meiriv,” said Lebanajjar again tapping her on the back before stepping into the van less bothered with the severity of the moment. I shoved my feet aside to allow him occupy the other end of the seat. Kanadia too entered and sat between us. Lebanajjar crossed his leg over Kanadia’s, assuming an amorous posture with her that left one wondering how easily married men and women fell in love in another country. It was as if they had never known love, as if they had never felt the nervous scotch of passion and the passions were bursting out only in a country where individual minds and instincts were liberated. I didn’t understand why this so much concerned me. I tried not to notice what was happening between Lebanajjar and Kanadia.

When Alejandra entered the minivan and started the engine, I pulled the shutter to close it. It dragged stubbornly on its rail then shut with a bang and I sat back in my chair.

“Treat that shutter with love,” said Lebanajjar.

“I’m sorry, sir, if that disturbed you,” I said, hoping that I had not distracted the newly-found romantic self.

“You need to be sorry. You don’t have these kinds of sophisticated vans in your country, do you?” He asked.

“No sir,” I said.

“Next time, ask and you’ll be told how to do things,” he said.

“And how was I to close the shutter?” I asked.

“You just needed to push down that little knob and it goes,” he said.

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“Everything must be treated with love,” he said.

“Again, I’m so sorry, sir. It was not my wish to commit adultery in America by showing love to the shutter of a minivan,” I said. Kanadia quickly removed Lebanajjar’s leg from her thigh and muttered some strange words. I could only hear some little twittering noise. She folded her legs, brought her knees to support her chin and stared directly in front of

her. I could see blood rushing to fill the pink vacuum in the flesh on her face. As for Lebanajjar he just waved me off and threw his arm around Kanadia's neck and continued the romance.

Alejandra had been waiting for Meiriv and Shizuka to take the lead. As soon as they moved, she wheeled the van into the streets and drove behind them towards Albuquerque.

"Ken, if I may ask. Apart from the books you brought to Parra have you published any articles?" asked Kanadia.

"A few," I said.

"How many?" asked Kanadia.

"Some eight articles," I said. She raised her head quickly and stared at me.

"In MLA approved journals?" she asked.

"Yes", I said.

"In eight different journals?" she asked in a firm voice.

"Eight different journals," I said.

"Journals approved by the MLA?" she asked.

"Of course, yes," I said.

"Journals approved by the Modern Language Association of America?" she asked emphatically, leaned back in her chair and stared at my face, awed.

"Journals approved by the Modern Language Association of Africa," I said staring directly into her eyes.

"Is there any such thing?" she asked after a while, turned her face away, leaned forward and resumed her former position. There was some silence. Only the music played by the van's music system and the throttling steam of the engine filled the atmosphere.

"Have you published any works, Kanadia?" I asked the lady.

"Yes," she said reluctantly without lifting her head.

"How many articles?" I asked.

"Three," she said.

“In Modern Language Association of America approved journals?” I asked. She was quiet. She fixed her gaze on the floor of the van, waxing her main toe.

“You are also a novelist, Ken,” asked Alejandra after a long silence, lowering the volume of the music.

“Yes,” I said.

“That’s lovely. I saw two of them the other day. You should be a promising author,” she said. The conversation between Alejandra and I dragged on. The other three pilgrims behind the minivan who up till that moment had only been listening asked questions about education, politics and culture in Africa.

At Albuquerque Airport the flight schedule was again altered partly because we had arrived late and it was explained to us there were more passengers than the planes and those who arrived earlier were checked in. It was the peak of the tourism season and the airports were unusually flooded. We were rescheduled for the next flight to Atlanta, Georgia and another to New York. At boarding time, I forgot going to the restroom. I always did that before I boarded the plane so that I was not under any pressure when the plane took off. I was a fearful air traveler. The plane could speed off the runway into the wilderness. And even when it took off successfully, it could crash with another plane or a mountain, especially in cloudy skies. Besides, the friends of darkness, like those of September 11 could be sitting innocently at a corner, pretentiously waiting for the appropriate moment to seize the plane and swing it into an abyss to satisfy a monstrous instinct. That was the most terrible way for one to end his life somewhere far away from the earth of one’s ancestors.

As soon as I submitted my boarding pass and took my seat, I felt more pressed with the urge to pee. I had been told that passengers didn’t use the lavatory when the plane was still on the ground or taking off. I sat by the window near the wing of the plane. The plane pulled slowly backwards, taxied slowly out of the terminal until it reached the runway, then stopped for a

while, gathered speed and took off. I watched the flaps of the wings move. Every person was quiet. I could hear only the pitch of the engine change with the fast rotation of the turbines. Every few seconds I felt a bump, then the shaking of the overhead compartments. As the plane took off from the ground in an upward inclination to the cloudy and windy sky the flight became very turbulent. A cold chill ran through my spine. I clenched the armrest of my seat and pressed it down as if to force the plane to land. High up in the sky the flight became more stable and after a few minutes came the confident and assuring voice of the captain requesting passengers to sit back and relax. At the same time the captain spoke I could see everyone feeling very relaxed. Some passengers stood and opened the overhead compartments and got out items from their carry-on baggage, some went straight to the restrooms. There was already a queue around the two restrooms closest to me on the rear of the plane. I couldn't wait any longer. I had to queue up too before the urine forced its way out.

A lady of about thirty-three sat alone on the last double seat to my right. She wore a pair of shorts that revealed much of her glossy laps. She was fidgeting with an iPad, scrutinizing and flipping large icons and photos through with her thumb. I occasionally threw an eye on the woman then on her laps making sure I was not caught in the act. The urge to urinate abandoned me for the moment. The fellows in the restrooms were taking too much time. When I turned again towards the lady our eyes met. Apparently, she had noticed that I was looking in her direction.

"Hi...", she said smiling.

"Hello," I said, echoing her tone.

"You wanna have a look at my pics?" she said, holding the flat electronic object towards me. There was a photograph on it. I sat down near her and gazed at the photograph.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt you. I'm Kelly," she said.

"Oh no. I guess I'm alright. I'm Kendem," I said.

“Ken...dem... Can I just call you Ken?” she asked.

“That’s okay,” I said.

“Okay Ken, have a look at this,” she said tilting toward me until her silk hair flowed on my face. “This is my new ride. How do you like it?” she said.

“Amazing,” I said. “What made?” I asked.

“It’s a limo, executive sedan limo,” she said, thumbing another icon which revealed a string of pictures of the car. “It’s got dual rear-seats power points, adjustable rear head restraints, heated rear seats, remote control air-conditioning and stereo....”

“Waooh! Really amazing! Extremely seductive,” I said.

“R-e-a-lly?” she asked emphatically, looking in my eyes.

“It’s just so beautiful,” I said. She placed the tablet on her chest and smiled generously.

“Where’re you traveling to?” she asked.

“New York.”

“D’you live there?”

“No, I’m in New York University for a couple of months.”

“Where d’you come from?”

“Cameroon.”

“Cameroon,” she said, then seeming to reflect. “Where’s Cameroon?”

“Central Africa.”

“Please, forgive me. I don’t know much about Africa. What’re you doing in New York University?”

“Participating in a Fulbright program.”

“You’re a university lecturer?”

“Yes.”

“Where’re you coming from?”

“Santa Fe. We are a group of academics from different parts of the world participating in the program. We are based in New York University but from time to time we move to other parts of the country,” I said. By now I had fully adjusted myself on the seat and we conversed as if we had known each other for long.

“And where does Kelly live?” I asked.

“Atlanta,” said the lady. “I was in Albuquerque for the weekend. I’m a medic,” she said thumbing the iPad to move from one picture to another.

“Are you married?” she asked.

“No. And what about you?” I asked. She sat quiet for some time, shifted towards me until our knees were touching. At that time Tunis-Aziz passed by me and went to the restroom, when he came out I too went in and after a short time returned to continue conversation with the lady.

“I’m divorcing with my husband,” she said. “He’s a lawyer and also a Professor of Law at the University of Atlanta.”

“Why are you divorcing,” I asked.

“We don’t agree on many things. It’s been such a painful experience to live with him,” she said.

“Have you any kids?” I asked.

“No. And that’s the heart of the matter. My husband’s a very rich fellow but he doesn’t want kids,” she said

“Interesting! So you live all alone?” I asked.

“All alone. I visit my parents often but that’s enough to share a passion,” she said. I sat with her for the rest of the three-hour flight discussing and sharing experiences. But my mind was at work, wondering why she so easily revealed her life to me, a far-off stranger, not one with the esteemed color, meeting thousands of meters above the sky.....

The pilot announced that the plane was preparing to land. Kelly held my hand as if she would not let me go. I could feel a tempting sensation in me, a sensation that could cause one to change the course of his journey, and of course, the course of his destiny. She stared fixedly into my eyes then turned her head away, looked through the window, then looked at me in the eyes again. I looked into her eyes too and my sinews were weakened and my nerves were beginning to riot. We both stared at each other without saying a word. But we were running out of time, time to explore passions and time to

endorse passions. The plane made its descent lower and lower until it touched the runway and taxied to the terminal.

“Will you like to visit me when your program is over?” she asked, giving me her complimentary card.

“Sure,” I said.

“Give me a ring as soon as you arrive at your destination,” she said in a soft low voice. While everyone was rushing out of the plane and leaving us behind she held my hand tightly. I could see the flow of passion in her eyes and the spirited blush on her face. I stood still with her while all other passengers were disembarking from the plane. I had to part with Kelly in order to catch up with the group of pilgrims.

“Goodbye, Kelly,” I said in a strenuous voice.

“Goodbye Ken, and please, don’t forget to give me a ring as soon as you arrive your destination,” she said, throwing her right arm over my shoulder and pulling me to herself. She stood on her toes and stretched herself upwards and touched my lips with hers. A passion rioted in my veins and it was like we should remain in the craft forever, like we should never let each other go. But time was running out. The passengers were by now completely out of the plane and a flight attendant stood staring at us, her hands clasped behind her while a sour smile lingered on her lips. We removed our hand baggage and went out of the plane, passed through the gate into the open space in the airport building terminal.

“Goodbye, Kelly,” I said again.

“Goodbye, Ken and safe journey,” she said.

A little distance from the exit gate the group was waiting for me. A barrage of questions came in at the same time.

“Where’ve you been, Ken?”

“What’s been happ’ning, Ken?”

“Were you dozing, Ken?”

“He probably couldn’t find his way out of the plane,” said Lebanajjar.

“I am really sorry I kept you waiting. I was sitting on the rear seat and had to wait for everyone to disembark,” I said. Kelly came after me and found the pilgrims questioning me.

“I’m so sorry. I’m the one who kept him,” she said and hugged me again very passionately then continued her way. I watched her follow the exit sign then turn towards the escalator and as she descended on the escalator she threw the last glance at me, waved and then faded out of sight. I followed the group to the terminal where we were to board a connecting flight. After Kelly left, I kept thinking about the exciting experience of falling in love in the sky. And when our feet touched the earth we were separated with unfulfilled passions and promises to keep in contact with each other.

At Atlanta, there was still another problem with the flight schedule. Meiriv and Alejandra went about to make arrangements for our departure. Tunis-Aziz and I moved about, visited the shops and restaurants and had a couple of beers but soon returned to the group, some of the pilgrims sat at a corner, some stretched out flat on the floor.

It was then that I noticed a black fellow. My heart gave a little leap. He reminded me of my brother and yet his face looked so familiar. He wore a blue outfit, thick gloves, hard long boots and a crash helmet with thick dark goggles pulled upwards on the forehead. He could easily pass for an airport engineer but for the fact that he pushed a waste trolley with a wheelie bin, broom and shovel. He stopped by a trash can, took out a loaded plastic bag and put it in the wheelie bin, replaced the plastic bag in the trash can and placed it in its original position. He was a friend, a secondary school teacher back home who had long left for the United States. I remembered his name. He was called Mula Bekondo but people generally called him Beko. We had heard news that he had long done a PhD and was then teaching in a university in Atlanta. I went up towards him and there was every indication that he was the one. I believed from his outfit that he might have done a PhD in some airport engineering, had taught in

the university for some time before abandoning it to look for a more lucrative job at the airport. But the point of dismay was, why was he carrying trash? The black fellow stood and stared at me as I approached him.

“Kendem?” he called out looking at me suspiciously.

“Beko!” I screamed and we hugged each other.

“Ma man, weti yu de do fo hia?” asked Beko.

“Ma man, a jus kom. Hau fo yu?” I asked.

“Massa, a de fain. So yu de Atlanta hia. Hey, bushfolla! Ma man, na wen yu fol bush?” asked Beko.

“A don bi US na several mons,” I said.

“Hau fo mai pipu dem fo K-Tong?”

“Ol man de fain.”

“So na wie yu de? Wussai yu di go now? Or yu don get bolo fo epot hia?” asked Beko unable to hide his excitement.

“Na pass wi di pass, O. A de wit dat pipu dem,” I said pointing at the group, some of them looking at us with curiosity. Beko stood for a while without saying a word. “Wi de fo New York University fo som program. We di weit plein fo go bak,” I said.

“Wussai wuna kommot nau?” asked Beko.

“Wi kommot New Mexico. Wi dong bi de olmos wan wik,” I said.

“Na hau long bi de program?” asked Beko.

“Ten mon,” I said.

“So yu min sei yu di go bak fo peyis?” asked Beko.

“A no sabi,” I said.

“Wai yu no remen fo hia? Ting dem beta fo hia pass fo peyi,” said Beko.

“A neva shio, Beko. Bot a go laik fo go bak,” I said. Beko cast an angry stare at me, pulled down the goggles to cover his eyes and steered the waste trolley round.

“Waka fain,” Beko said, pushing the trolley away.

“Beko, na hau? Na weti di hapen?” I asked.

“Massa, a se waka fain. Go tok fo peyi hau we yu si Bekondo di kari doti fo America,” said Beko.

“Beko!” I called.

“Wakaman, waka,” he said, quickening his pace.

“Beko! Beko!” I called out again. Beko was gone. I could not understand why Beko behaved the way he did. That was not my focus. It was a good opportunity to find out about my brother. Beko certainly would have provided me with useful information about my brother being the first Cameroonian I had met. I thought I should move around the airport to get a trace of him again but I had to be careful. I could lose track of the group. Some thirty minutes later the pilgrims boarded the plane for New York.

Twenty

When we arrived in New York early that evening there were persistent talks about the New York City Gay Pride Parade on the coming Sunday. Lebanajjar and Dos Santos were particularly excited about it. They shuffled in and out discussing their plans to witness the event and inviting members of the group to accompany them to 5th Avenue that Sunday. I tried to understand the gay parade phenomenon but I couldn't really figure out what it was all about. I had heard about gay practices gaining grounds in contemporary life and always had a strange feeling. I had so many questions on my mind with relative difficulty finding answers. It was a crime to talk against certain practices because you could earn the wrath of its supporters. For that reason I kept my mouth shut; kept my mouth shut so that I could return to my country without hurting anyone. Besides, asking to know more about the practice could make one vulnerable to some predator. It could also possibly give the impression that I was an interested partner. Perhaps the best way to understand the phenomenon was to witness the parade. At first, I wrestled with my conscience and morality to decide whether or not it was ethical for me to witness it. My imagination led me into a hall in some sophisticated part of the city where naked men and women were engaged in erotic and vulgar display, men with men and women with women. And I believed that anyone in attendance was connected to it somehow and anyone inside could pay the prize or receive a reward for being present.

On Saturday evening prior to the event, no activity was scheduled for the pilgrims. There had been some light showers early in the evening and when it stopped it left Manhattan with a chilly atmosphere. Joda came to find out from me if I was accompanying them to the event. He understood why I hesitated and explained that the parade was to take place on the

open street on Fifth Avenue and anyone could watch without being enticed into it. We went round the Washington Square area visiting one shop and the other, with the plan to have a drink in a pub and eventually go to a nightclub. Then we moved from Washington Square up to Union square. Several blocks east, Joda stopped and looked searchingly into one of the shops in a chain of big shops along that line.

“Wow, I’ve been looking for this,” he said, stepping behind to have a closer look at the inscriptions above the door of one of the shops directly in front of us. I followed his eyes and found the words “Forbidden Eden” written on the wall. It was the name of the shop.

“Looking for what?” I asked.

“Come let’s have a look in here,” he said and entered the shop. I followed him in. The shopkeeper, a fat middle-aged lady with limp jaws and disheveled hair scrutinized our faces and welcomed us with a generous smile. As we went through the flight of shelves there were lots of cards, stationeries, magazines, music, videos, books on display. Joda took a few articles, admired them and put them back in their original positions. What caught my attention when I took a closer look at the shelves was their pornographic content. On the other side of the store there were several shelves stuffed with assorted plastic material associated with porn. I wondered why Joda showed such strong admiration for the articles he went round the shop selecting and scrutinizing. I wished that we could get out of there as soon as possible, before any person who knew me found me inside there. We met a few other people in the shop, some screening the articles on the shelves while others picked up different articles and examined them closely. I first came across a young man who was roughly thirty years of age. He had an object in his hand which he examined with such passionate intensity. I looked closely and realized that it was an artificial female organ. He raised his head and stared at me with the tail of his eyes, rays of dangerous signs emitted from the look. I shuddered then turned round and

pretended to look for an article on the shelves. I was going against the law by interfering with his private life. I moved a little further and came across a young lady. She was slightly above twenty five, holding a mega dildo in her left hand, her fingers barely going round three quarters of its circumference. I stopped for a while, looked at the phallic object in her hand. Why? Why was the world the way it was? Why were people so closed up with intimate yearnings? Was man and woman unable to open up the innermost sanctum of their feelings to reveal where the wound hurt? Must people allow their passions to burn them into ashes because they couldn't scream out when fires burned from within? Did one need a sledgehammer to break the silence? Or could technology mend erotic passions? Could technology provide the soft touch that sent blood rioting in the veins? The lady noticed my consternation and held down the object by her side as if it weighed several pounds, staring sternly on the floor. I stood there transfixed, looking at her and the object. Here were people using advanced technology to work out things for themselves, I said to myself. The shopkeeper coughed faintly, I turned to look in her direction. She shook her head slightly, twitching her swollen eyelids, a sour smile hung on her lips while she looked at me questioningly. It was then I thought I should better leave the shop before the shopkeeper called the police and charged me for trespassing psychological spaces of her customers. I waited for Joda in front of the shop. He was still foraging item after item when I walked out of the shop. When he met me, he told me he would be visiting the shop later to buy some items. We went to a bar and drank a few glasses of beer before going to the nightclub.

The following Sunday I attended the 9 o'clock mass at the Church of St. Joseph and by 11 o'clock I was back at the Palladium. Pakista and Indira were already at the lobby waiting for the others to start moving. The parade was to take place on Fifth Avenue at the 23rd Street and Pakista and Indira were desirous to arrive in time in order not to miss any aspect of the

display. I could also see a lot of anxiety in them, a lot of nervousness which informed me that they were also going to watch the parade for the sake of experience. I hurried into the elevator and alighted at the fifth floor, went straight to my apartment to drop my Bible and to change my dresses. By the time I returned to the Palladium, Lebanajjar and Dos Santos were informing the others that it was time to go. They knew how to get to the 5th Avenue by subway and requested if interested persons could go with them.

The 23rd Street on the Fifth Avenue was crammed with the cheery crowds on both sides. They stood on the sidewalks behind barriers placed to prevent the on-looking crowd from stepping onto the wide open road. We squeezed ourselves through the crowd until we had a comfortable view of the street. Down the open road was brilliance, exotic colors evoking every feature of erotic passion in the human imagination. Thousands of gays and lesbians dressed in fabulous and exotic costumes walked the streets. Some carried banners which bore messages of militant homosexual lobby like “Ban the Churches for Turning down Gay Job Applicants!” “Solidarity against Homophobia!” Some held huge rainbow flags, umbrellas and balloons while others rode colorful floats. There were men who dressed like brides and walked bashfully down the street although you could still detect male muscular features as they walked; women dressed like men some wearing false beards but the soft feminine tempo of nature’s creation betrayed their looks. There were bands marching down the street and one could readily see one of the colorful groups carrying a banner on which was written “Gay Officers Action League”. An aura of passion caressed the atmosphere as if an erotic spell had been cast over Fifth Avenue that Sunday afternoon. I turned round occasionally and saw sweaty red faces surrounding me and asked myself: could God’s plan for the world be altered by people? If God made the ram it was because He created the ewe to graze on those passions which only the ram had the natural right to

provide. And if God made the ewe it was because it provided the green passions for the ram to graze on. But now one could not say of the sweaty faces surrounding me who the rams were and who were the rammed. At the moment, I found myself in real *manyaka*; in real deep *manyaka*. I believed that man was in the higher order of animals because he possessed a rational faculty to be able to discriminate values which otherwise could not be determined by a pig for example. I believed man was above the other animals because he could act following a particular logic and rationale and he had the ability to think and determine the order of the universe. I believed that man was the supreme animal because he possessed a consciousness which made him to know whether he was acting positively or negatively, which made him able to foster human dignity above all other animals through the knowledge of what was right and what was wrong. I believed the rational self in man was the one that could override the instinct in man, instinct being a universal animal daemon, the governing mechanism of all animal life that dictated to the rhythm of passions and the move towards the accomplishment of its sensibilities. So, what could be man's objective to thwart God's purpose for man on earth?

A certain sensation rocked my senses. It swept through me like a thunderstorm and I felt silly. I turned round and found my way in the company of others and we went back to the Palladium. As I got into the elevator, there were a number of people who alighted at the second floor and surprisingly, Lebanajjar and Dos Santos came in and noticing my presence, Lebanajjar brushed me off with the tip of his fingers, held Dos Santos firm and they both started savoring each other's lips and tongue, breathing heavily till when I came out on the fifth floor. I went straight to my room and took a bath. I opened the shower and adjusted the tap until I had the desired degree of warm water and stayed within it cleaning myself for more than half an hour.

Twenty-One

The Tuesday panel discussion did not hold in the conference room of the Steinhardt School of Education. The Graduate Assistants were on strike and their professors were acting in solidarity with them. Because of this there were no activities on the New York University campus. The panel discussion was then moved to some private premises. The subject of discussion was Ethnicity, Race and Gender in American politics. The three panelists included Dav Ching, Stella Hugh and Eugenic White. Dav and Stella spoke about the structure and dynamics of American politics. Eugenic White spoke last, concentrating on racial diversity in the US. He was a significant fellow, tall and hefty and spoke with so much assurance. He wore a dazzling white shirt over a brown pair of khaki trousers. The upper part of his shirt was unbuttoned and exposed tufts of brown wiry hair on his upper chest. He was low-shaven and his pink-red face, contrasted neatly with his dazzling white shirt. His eyeballs spotted with grey pupils rolled blurredly, a consortium of the fierce hairs stood on his eyelids, above a firm long nose into which sank a pair of thin holes. Time and again he removed a white handkerchief from his trouser pocket, held it to the tip of his nose and as he blew the content into the handkerchief, a rough rattling sound ensued. Then he went on with his talk, classifying and describing the races of the world. He began with the Caucasian races and talked elaborately about the white race as being mainly of European origin, followed by the Mongolian races of Eastern Asia and concluded with the negroid races particularly of Africa South of the Sahara which classified last. He looked round as if he was expecting someone to challenge his theory, then he removed his handkerchief, held it to his nose and blew the content in it, this time with more force, making a harsh cracking and rattling sound like the

sound of a broken engine. As he stuffed the handkerchief into his trouser pocket, he looked round again to see if there was anyone to oppose his views. My eyes met his and he appeared determined to make a more definite statement.

“In fact, blacks are unclassified, if one has to look at it from the purity of races,” he concluded. I shuffled in my chair, the innate voice of truth entreating me to express my point of view with subtlety. There was need to comment on statements that were treacherous to the universal concept of nature’s design; it was necessary to honestly address such issues, so long as we contributed to world peace, to the understanding of the world; so long as we suggested fresh ways of understanding one another for the sake of attaining universal peace and happiness. I fought hard to caution myself because intellectual ethics did not permit me to interrupt the Professor. Showing any sort of resentment was only going to provide evidence against my race. I had to be subtle in the way I reacted to the Professor’s proclamations. Professor Eugenig White sat back in his chair, crossed his leg and waited for reactions from the participants. I put up my hand, filled with the dire quest for truth. It was evident that I could not stand on the same intellectual threshing ground with the Professor. He was a widely read gentleman and a specialist in his trade. I still felt however that I could make my comments. He stood a better chance of educating me more about the world and that was what he was there for.

“Yes sir,” said Eugenig White, slightly tilting his head to the right and scrutinizing my stature. His face bore the expression of one who did not believe in the dilution with the white race, one to whom the so-called unrefined or unclassified races were irrelevant appendages to creation.

“Thank you,” I said. “My question is addressed to Professor White. You said a while ago that the black race is unclassified. But I remember that before slavery was abolished blacks in America were classified as slaves. Don’t you think that it is questionable today to say blacks are unclassified, about

two centuries after the abolition of slavery and after racist mentalities have long been cleansed with more global concern for the respect of individual rights and liberties, a cause which the United States has long championed?" I asked. Professor White's eyes narrowed and the wrinkles on his forehead wrapped into thick folds while he looked round to find out if the other panelists understood me.

"Your accent's slightly heavy. C'n you say that again?" he said, pulled out the slimy and twisted handkerchief from his pocket and blew out the content of his nostrils into it, still turning round to confirm his opinion from the expression on the faces of the others. But I wasn't listening to him anymore, I was feeling a little stupid. My mind was far away battling with issues. I was daunted with the question of color or call it race. God created the universe rich in variety, big and small, short and tall, red and green, scary and attractive, monstrous and lovely, elegant and ugly. And it was for life to accept that it was created as such. I, Kendem had never refused that the color of my skin was black. I was black, comfortably black. When the sun shone on me the darkness glittered like a mirage on the tarmac, and when I walked in the night my shadow was brilliant like the white shade of the morning. I was grateful to the gods of my ancestors for making me black. That was why I was capable of absorbing all the heat in the world. I was grateful to Lebialem and Fuondem that breathed in the earth and the sun rose and shone on my head and radiated in the universe. True, my accent was heavy as Professor White had remarked. That was because my lips are thick and my nose is broad. When I sneeze, my nostrils sound like a volcanic eruption. When I am excited I breathe like a wind, like a very big storm; when I am happy I speak like a gong. And when I am angry I roar like a lion. I am black, pure black. At least, I can claim purity of the black skin. But I cannot claim purity which is contrary to my skin color. How did this claim of purity of skin color or purity of blood come about? Even the esteemed color was rare to find. Was skin color a metaphor or

a symbol of some ambiguous concept of refinement? Could it be that someone's ancestors originally had the purified skin color and because of global warming their progenies found their skin gradually fading to some sort of color? Was skin color a status marker? Was it one of those strategies human beings used to uplift their egos or make their lives more meaningful, by thinking that their color was more refined than that of others? If not why did a man think that because his skin was supposedly of the esteemed color his God was kinder to him than that of people with different skin colors? And talking about refined race or purity of race; what does anyone do with refined race? I know that refined wine tastes good; it is extremely balanced and has a beautiful taste. Maybe refined race or purity of race is better appreciated or makes more sense to cannibals. As for me I had never understood the reason for qualifying race. I am black and the color of my shadow is black and the color of my blood is black. If I had blue skin, would the color of my blood also be blue and the color of my shadow also blue? I sympathized with Bangla, a dark-skinned fellow with curly hair from South Asia who asked:

“Are those of us from South Asia considered blacks?” I wondered why he asked the question. A fellow whose dark features were very evident would want to know whether he was also considered black. I sympathized with him because his perception of skin color was blurred. Black was a feature attributed to people from a certain continent and blacks in South Asia were not blacks because they were from South Asia. I thought Professor White could comfort him by telling him that skin color was not the matter. It was the perception that mattered. If you were yellow, pink-colored, orange, red or red-brown or dark brown or black, your perception could be that of refinement depending on the continent from which you hailed. Color was an important project in God's design for the world, to create a harmony of different colors just like the rainbow. The world should celebrate variety and not despise it. Suppose God created everything white...? While the question

and answer session went on I kept ruminating over the issue of race. When the session ended I kept my distance as we walked to the Palladium.

Twenty-Two

After the panel discussion I felt more and more out of spirit, partly because I was still unable to trace my brother. Also, my meeting and separation with Kelly in the plane to Atlanta contributed to my moodiness. I had exchanged several emails with her and she was still as passionate as ever. The brief moment we spent together in the plane always made me feel that had I found a treasure in the sky, a treasure near God's home. It had been a moment of uncertain romance with the aircraft tearing its way through space, making hearts tremble for one another, a journey coaxed with yearning sentiments which in that brief moment could bind and welder the hearts of two people foreign to each other in that boundless region beyond the sky, hearts that passion brought very close wishing for a moment of fulfillment. How passion could consume time! The three hours flight reduced to thirty minutes of intimate dialogue, of stories told from the bottom of the hearts with wishes beaming of hope and beatitude. Behold, all of this got lost as soon as our feet touched the earth in Atlanta. I had continued to assure her in my emails that when the program came to an end I would visit her. And she sent back emails with lots of promises of a comfortable stay with her. I was tense with a passion for Kelly and walked the streets of New York with Kelly's image on my mind, heard voices that sounded like Kelly's, saw women that looked like Kelly and her image accompanied my imagination even to the most hostile realms of romance. In one of her latest emails she had promised visiting New York during a weekend.

And if she did come? Were the preservers of the dignity of the purity of races not going to stand between two yearning hearts? The world seemed to have turned suddenly against me and my color was so pronounced that every action and word

questioned my being openly. And when a few days later after the last panel discussion we had a guided tour of Harlem, I was still asking myself questions. I had been told that Harlem was dominantly a black neighborhood and who knows? That could be a chance for me to meet my brother or get information about him. Looking for my brother was straining me further. It became obvious that I was looking for him in the wilderness. Cities in the United States were so well organized with distinct avenues and streets with house numbers that one could easily find his way through. But looking for someone without an address was like looking for a pin in the Sahara.

The tour of Harlem took place in the morning. I felt disgusted and withdrawn as the group toured the neighborhood. I could imagine what was on the minds of the other members of the group. I had read much about the despicable conditions of the blacks in the Harlem Renaissance Literature. As we toured the neighborhood, I was hoping to see the slums and the deprecatory conditions in which the souls of black folks had resided for centuries. The neighborhood did not appear as scummy as I had imagined. Things had long evolved. Time and civilization had transformed the neighborhood although the place still bore the aura of centuries that hung heavily in the atmosphere. Much of the neighborhood remained serene and quiet. There were fewer people here than other parts of New York we had visited. Most of the inhabitants had gone into the city to look for jobs. The ones we saw were predominantly black but there were also people of mixed colors – dark-brown, brown, red-brown, pink-brown and other sorts of the combinations of the color of the human skin, hair and texture.

We visited Colombia University, some churches and mosques. The tribulations of history still hung heavily in the air while the blacks who gave brief talks about their institutions still bore the aura of sorrow and desperation that had forever stuck to their voices; their voices could still tell the story of the tortuous path through which they had walked from liberty into

slavery, from slavery to freedom, and from freedom to the bondage of color discrimination; a walk towards acceptance and rejection, towards recognition and repulsion, towards the constitutional condemnation of racial prejudice and the cynical practice of it. As they spoke their voices relived the cry of lost folks long carted away from their ancestral earth; that long cry in broken, coarse voices that had created a culture of rap music and the blues and the hip-hop; that cry that transformed centuries of woe into rhapsodies of gospel songs and spirituals so profound that they could wake God in his sleep; that soulful cry that troubled the mind and wrung any heart that still had some iota of conscience in it; that cry that God alone knew, had hardened the nerve and the core of race in the empire of liberty; that cry that stirred part of the soul and brought tears to the eyes. I listened to them talk as some force or mystical presence consumed the spirit in me making me feel very light and my limbs weak. We had lunch in one of the restaurants and by midday we boarded the subway for Union Square, then walked down to the Palladium for the afternoon recess.

In the afternoon, pilgrims attended a presentation by Brian Buff in the conference room of the Steinhardt School of Education. The talk was on Black Migration and its impact on the Bronx. He was Professor of Black History with emphasis on the Bronx neighborhood in New York, a fairly young adult with a red-white complexion and a rather large and broad nose. In his presentation, Brian Buff talked about the situation of the blacks who lived in the Bronx after slaves were freed.

“Blacks in the Bronx are poor, dirty and dangerous” he said. “Even the few who manage to acquire property or who live in the white neighborhood have their houses and property burnt. The whites who were kind simply abandoned the neighborhood,” he went on. He sounded like some propagandist spokesman against the blacks, perhaps with the intention of pleasing a eugenicist master and to be congratulated thereafter for a job well done. Even if his eugenicist master were absent he did at least entertain some of

the pilgrims with what some of them would very much like to hear, some of the pilgrims who were very pleased with the wanton degradation of black people. As he spoke, Lebanajjar and Dos Santos made a number of gestures and inaudible comments directed at me. I wished I could break the cords that held my mind and the senses hostage, the cords that wrapped hopes and aspirations in an entanglement of complexes. I wished I could ask questions and make comments that could make us understand each other better. That was the principal reason, I thought, discussions in seminars and conferences were meant for: to help us understand each other and the world better. I decided to be calm, trying to understand the implication of Brian's presentation. It touched on a very delicate issue concerning the human personality. It raised some very disturbing issues especially because it highlighted just the negative aspects of the blacks and failed to see anything good in them, to see that these people were the pillars of the great civilization, their centuries of forced labor in the plantations. If blacks were poor, dirty and hostile, what did anyone expect from a people who for centuries had been subjected to slavery in the plantations and the industries and were later freed without provision for homes or means of surviving? Basic psychology tells us that any individual who is deprived is bound to violence. I think the slave dealers owe a huge apology for this historical misdemeanor whereby people were captured from their natural environment, sold as slaves and subjected to centuries of woe. And I also think that someone like Brian who had done proper investigation on black history could objectively point out these facts. He talked of lack of collaboration between blacks and whites. I remembered that, that morning in Harlem we had seen people of varied colors, different species of people. What would have been the reasons for the mixed breed of people one found around? Didn't this mean that although blacks were rejected by the whites during the day there was serious collaboration between them in the night? I mean, doesn't one see the results of nocturnal activities

revealed clearly on skin color during the day? Doesn't one see this in the colored breed we find around?

When Brian ended his talk we ate some burgers and drank coffee. The chatter mood that usually reigned after an academic talk was absent at the moment. The pilgrims went about as if there was nothing to comment and that the speaker had done such thorough research that there was no implication in all what he had said. Rather somehow unconsciously, I felt that the rest of the pilgrims were politely and secretly observing my reaction. I avoided looking in anyone's face and concentrated on my burger and cup of coffee.

On our way to the Palladium thereafter, several pilgrims paced up to meet me.

"Ken, how did you like Brian's talk?" asked Frances.

"Interesting, quite interesting," I said. "Only he was a little too biased".

"I don't agree with Ken," said Chilia. "Professor Buff said just what he felt about the blacks".

"And that's where I have a big problem," I said. "When we are dealing with science we talk objectively. And when we are dealing with romance we can talk about feelings. I agree with you that there were more of feelings and emotions in the treatment of the topic than real scientific assessment of issues," I said.

"That's not what I mean," said Chilia.

"What did you mean, M'am?" I asked.

"You appear a little too hard on Brian?" said Frances.

"I'm sorry if I am," I replied.

"I mean, I feel embarrassed myself. And y'know he is colored," she said.

"He, colored?" I asked, staring fixedly in her eyes. I could now understand the reason for the broadness of Brian's nose and a possible link with the black race.

"In fact, he is," she said.

"I wished I knew that. But am I really hard on him, Frances?" I asked.

“You are,” said Frances. “Just thinking that he didn’t speak well of the blacks is being a little too hard on him. I mean, after everything he’s a scholar who’s done good research.”

“Well, I am really, really sorry if I’m hard on him,” I said. As we parted I wondered about the phenomenon of race. I had considered Brian Buff as one whose skin was lighter than that of most ordinary Europeans and Americans only now to be told by Frances that he was not of the original pure and privileged race. Brian Buff was colored! Which is that race that is not colored? White is a color, black is a color, red is a color, pink is a color, brown is a color.... Brian Buff was one of those who had white skin with less than an ounce of black blood in his veins but that still disqualified him from belonging to the purified race; one of those whose mothers possibly went in hot quest for black gold and the result was the colored prize. I shuffled in my bed, got up, went into the toilet, came out, stood at the window, watched the street, and went back to bed and after a few minutes I repeated the whole process until sleep visited me at some late hour in the night. But I did not sleep for long. As soon as it was dawn, I went through the morning routine of taking a bath, dressing up, eating breakfast and walking to the conference room. I didn’t wait for anyone or ring my normal companions, Joda, Tunis-Aziz or Tugu. When I alighted on the third floor of the Steinhardt School of Education, Bill Host was standing in front of his office. I tried to avoid him but he came towards me.

“Hello Ken,” he said offering me a handshake. “Good morning,” he said releasing his hand and putting it on my shoulders. “How’re you doing? I expected you to make some great comments yesterday after Brian’s talk. That fellow has to sit up,” he said. I felt comforted with Host’s words. He was such a kind loving, self-effacing old man of about sixty-five who possibly had studied the world and known that the greatest value in it was to be truthful, to love rather than to hate, to care rather than to scorn. And he went on both in action and words to push on these virtues in his handling of

the pilgrims. I always felt comfortable in his presence. I thought to myself, if there were a few more people like him the world would be a much better place.

Other members of the group alighted from the elevator and came into the corridor where I had been talking with Bill. I went with them into the conference room.

Twenty-Three

The following afternoon, we made a tour of Brooklyn, the Financial District including Wall Street and the New York Stock Exchange. After a long walk we arrived at the World Trade Center foundation which anchored the Financial District in downtown Manhattan. Before the 9-11 attack the twin towers had stood magnificent, imposing themselves on the highest limits of the sky. But on the day of the visit it was a large opening, a giant pit fenced with metal. I could see through the openings on the metal fence, the gaping pit in which the feet of the twin towers sank into the core of the earth. Several impressive buildings still stood round the void glittering with metallic blue in the summer sun. Tourists streamed in and out of the vicinity awed with wonder, some taking photographs while other jittering groups of people floated around the steel fence, struggling to catch every detail of the foundation. There was nothing really significant down there in the large vacuum except some concrete structures and steel work in the basement that revealed the Ground Zero, the debris had long been cleared and the foundation at that moment remained the only link between history, the imagination and God.

I had watched the sinister incident on television in my country on that tragic day. Images of September Eleven filled my mind as I peeped through the metal fence of Ground Zero. The red glowing flames, the huge volleys of smoke that covered the skies over New York City, the melting twin towers, the woes and the cries of human beings melting with the towers seemed to strike me at the moment with a force of terror where I stood trying to perceive every detail of the foundation. I was living in a world of hatred and intolerance, a world in which men and women sweated with terror in the homes, terror in a cup of coffee, terror in the market places,

terror in the churches, terror in the kitchens, terror in workplaces, terror in the neighborhood, terror within nations, terror between nations; the terror of the oppressors and the terror of the oppressed. Terror! The worst of it came from the unknown, unanticipated, the cause for which has never been clearly explained and the end never predictable. I had watched the incident several times on television and believed I no longer understood the world and the goal of civilization. It was macabre, dark and sinister. I had seen the towers melting like wax beneath huge volleys of dark smoke with infernal red glow within. I had seen people jumping from, maybe the 100th storey with the desperate hope of saving their lives. I had seen the stampede, seen the rush, men and women stumbling as they fled to safety to destinations they were unsure of. I had seen men and women running helter-skelter, unsure where they were escaping to, where the battleground was, who the enemy was and where he was launching his attack on an innocent humanity. I had seen the dead and the wounded coughing blood, smeared with blood, rushed away from the inferno by petrified yet daring rescue volunteers and sour-looking policemen and women. I had seen panic and agony on sweaty faces, seen lives, thousands of lives turned into rubble in a couple of minutes. I had seen the debut of the twenty-first century, had watched the blood-stained century smudge all hopes and dreams with terror. I had seen the darkness, the impenetrable darkness at the center of light. I had seen the horror, horror, horror!

Towards nightfall we left the World Trade Center Foundation, tracing our way through the ever thickening crowds, passing through alleys and hallways into the streets, down into the subways to board the train to Union Square. My mind was lost, lost. I felt a little agitation in my nerves because I couldn't understand why someone would design such a heinous act to take away thousands of innocent lives. I could not understand why humanity was going contrary to God's plan for the world. Was the devil still too powerful in the world

despite the innumerable churches and cathedrals and basilicas and mosques and temples and shrines? And ugh, the Pentecostal tragedy! Did myriad people not come out of the shades professing to be inspired preachers and prophets and Men-of-God and promising the hopeful deliverance? Was the devil still so much in control when high-spirited religious crusades and extreme spiritual fanaticism stirred the streets and neighborhoods? I remembered a church in my neighborhood back in the country in which Believers beat drums and bands with such vengeance and sang or shouted prayers at the top of their voices in the core of the night in the Mighty name of the Holy One. As if they heard that the Holy One was deaf. Did they not reel off incantations or prayers and prophesies in loud shrieking voices over loudspeakers with fast and coherent repartee during the invocation of the Holy One, as if they were suffering from severe emotional tremors? Had millions of prophets and pastors and priests and popes and imams not sprung up in times of darkest fate to preach and promise salvation in the most powerful name of the Holy One? And was the devil still so much in control? Was the world taking a sharp turn for the worst? The world needed prayers. The world needed prayers not propaganda. The world needed prayers to avert the crises of unabashed evil and of sodomy, in order that dark souls with the darkest intents were cleansed and purified.

That night I had a dream and I was surrounded by two raging camps of fire. There was the fire at the World Trade Center and the fire that razed my father's compound. I felt my nerves tautened and I appeared to be choking with smoke even when I was looking for a way to escape. I was sweating and shouting and the fire was encircling me rapidly. I screamed so loud that when I opened my eyes I realized that I was very tired and had slept off without putting out the light. I put it out and went back to sleep. But before long, I was in another realm of the dream reliving the experience of the fire incident which destroyed my father's compound. I cannot say how old I was but I remember somehow vaguely that it was the first incident

in which I became conscious of being. Vivid images of that childhood experience came to me as if I was living it anew. It was at nightfall when villagers were returning from the farm. I stood with my mother on the hill overlooking the main compound. I held her hand and watched her weep. Other women rushed to the scene and wept with her. The red flames sputtered and fluttered in the wind devouring the aluminum roof that collapsed steadily into the red glowing chambers. Huge volleys of black smoke rose and sailed leisurely up above the valley behind the compound. I watched it in flurried excitement not understanding why it caused my mother and the other people a lot of grief.

A throng of men, women and children in the neighboring compounds gathered in groups on the hill where I stood with my mother. They had heard the shouting or had seen the huge volleys of smoke from the neighboring hills or had been summoned when the wooden gong that lay in a small hut at the entrance to the compound was played. The men came with their machetes, the women and children came with dishes and buckets with which they fetched water, sand and soil and gave to the men to put out the fire. But the fire had grown so wild and voracious that any further attempt to subdue it could lead to the loss of human lives. And so the people resignedly, stood in groups and tried to conjecture what could have been the cause of the fire. Some told stories of fire disasters in the past and how they had managed them. What could not be understood about this particular disaster was that the fire came from behind the main house near my father's bedroom.

My father had just returned from Nigeria where he went occasionally to trade after the cocoa season. It was nightfall when his wives and children assembled in the *lemoo* to listen to stories which my father told about his trip to Nigeria. Our compound was filled with excitement because he brought us many new things – dresses, dried meat, and fish, coconuts, sweats and lots of other delicacies. He also brought a lot of strange things for traditional dances with which I accompanied

him to ceremonies. Sometimes he brought black wooden statues and sold to his customers. The protector of my father's household was a carved statue which he placed on an open depression on the wall of the *lemoo*. It was said to protect the compound from witchcraft and other evil intensions. As was often said, herbs had been squeezed into its eyes and it could see, speak and chase away thieves and wizards from our compound.

One morning, shortly after his return from one of his trips to Nigeria, my father raised an alarm after discovering that one of the legs of the statue was broken. My father had inquired from a diviner and had been told that it broke its leg while chasing someone who had come to commit evil in our compound shortly after his return. My father told the story to everyone that had come to the compound to welcome him from his journey. One of such people was Mbe Ebehsoh who was the last person to visit my father the evening of the fire disaster. He had conversed with my father for a long time. My father had told him about his adventures, the wealth he had made during his trip and showed him some of the valuable things he had bought. When dusk gathered, Mbe Ebehsoh rose to go. My father cut a piece of dried codfish wrapped it in a dried plantain leaf and gave to him.

"Thank you", Mbe Ebehsoh had told my father. "When I hit my right toe on a stone on my way here to greet you I knew you had good things for me. Come well, Mbe Tanju-Ngong. The gods of the clan shall protect you and your household." He said, crossed the courtyard and climbed the slope onto the main road.

My mother and other relatives remained in the *lemoo* to hear the strange things about Nigeria. It was a place where people flowed like a stream and people were killed and abandoned by the roadsides, a place where people never slept in the night and the night shone as clear as the day. Of a sudden my father exclaimed pointing towards the corridor leading to his bedroom: "Where is this happening?" Before we had time to

look in that direction he skipped to his feet, peeped through the door leading to the corridor and shouted “Fire! Fire! The compound is on fire! He dashed into his room and came out again with a few possessions. The volley of smoke sailed into the *lemoo*. My mother seized me, clutched me to her chest and rushed out to the courtyard. The fire had crossed to my mother’s house and was eating wildly into the roof. She wept for the little savings she had stored in a wall in her house. She set me down on the courtyard and was rushing for the money but a neighbor intercepted her and pulled her away.

“Ngwi-nkem, you want to kill yourself? Take your little bird to a safe place on the hill. He is the most valuable thing god ever gave you,” he said. The heat around the compound was becoming very offensive. My mother wept and wept. The neighbor seized me from my mother and carried me on his shoulders and went up the hill while some people pulled my mother away from the courtyard to the top of the hill where we watched the compound burn to its conclusion. We were taken to my father’s brother’s compound in the neighborhood where we were to live for some time.

The clan woke up that morning with the awful memory of what had happened in our compound in the night. This could be seen when the *levueh*, a rehabilitation scheme started early that morning in our compound. No one wanted to be told what he or she had to do. Everyone abandoned their work for the day and came to our compound. Men brought sticks, thatches, cane ropes... women brought raw foods like cocoyams, dried tadpoles, oil, salt and others. The old men who came without a tool or implement, gave material assistance by sending young men to their raffia bushes or special bushes to look for raffia leaves and sticks. People were divided into groups. Some were dispatched to look for more building materials since two of the six houses in the compound – *lemoo* and my mother’s house were most seriously affected. This group was made up of young energetic men and a few ageing adults. Others were assigned to clear the debris of the

disaster in and around the mud-brick walls that still stood stiff although some parts had collapsed with the roof. This group was made up of elderly men who could not easily move into the dark bushes or carry bulky goods. They were aided by women who came from distant neighborhoods. Other women prepared food on the outskirts of the wrecked compound.

As soon as the scheme was launched, the young men invaded the bushes singing manjong songs:

Ho yo! Ho!
Ho! Ho!
Ho!
Fire is a trifle.
It consumes houses but not men
Man is the greatest
If we are more than one
What can be above us?
Ho yo!
Ho! Ho!
Ho!

Mbe Tanju-Ngong, warrior
Cannot sleep in the open cold
He shall live in his house
Manjong, invade the bushes
Search for the things
That will bring
Mbe Tanju-Ngong home
Ho yo!
Ho! Ho!
Ho!

The voices resounded in the bushes and gradually faded out as the groups went in different directions. The very old men remained in the compound. They put their bamboo seats

under the plum tree near the armpit of the cliff at the end of the courtyard and gave directives and advice to the younger people and told stories of similar disasters that had taken place in the past. They broke and shared colanuts, passed round snuff cups and tobacco pipes. The children who were big enough to do something were also employed to carry water from the stream, take colanuts, snuff cups and pipes from one elder to the other, or run minor errands from one compound to the other. The children who were still very young played about in the soft bushes on the hill overlooking the compound.

I was in the group that played in the bushes, rolling in the soft *kappela* grass, chasing grasshoppers, building huts with grass roofs, making small clay pots out of the brown earth.... Sometimes the children stole material like tinder and pieces of iron that adults used in lighting their pipes, knives, oil, and salt to do their own cooking in the bushes. Others played hide-and-seek in the thickets, or masked themselves with *kappela* grass to frighten the very young ones. Occasionally we went on the way of the older ones destroying their grass houses or their clay pots or indicated where some were hiding in the hide-and-seek game. We were beaten in return, pinched or knocked on the head. My mother was not usually too far away from me but this day she was occupied with numerous things concerning her house. She came once to look for me to ensure that I was not being fouled by the older children or was not venturing into the *kenub* grass which had sharp pointed leaves that were very painful if one stepped on them. If she heard me crying she would hurry to the scene wailing, "Yeesh, only child! Who gave me this only one that they want to kill?" The bigger children who had pinched me or knocked my head for betraying them in their hide-and-seek game would escape into the thickets. My mother would carry me away on her back warning me not to play with those bad children again. But as soon as she put me down I would disappear to the bushes to start playing again with the other children.

Not long after, I was hungry and went to see my mother, passing through the plum tree where the old men sat. Mboh was there too. He was perhaps the oldest man in the compound at the time. As I passed near him Mboh carefully put aside his walking stick, caught me by the arm and held me up in the air in both hands, put me between his thighs and looked into my face. I wriggled and struggled to break free from his hold. The old man looked rather scary. His jumper was tattered and one of the sleeves had completely torn off. Besides he had an awkward smell of tobacco and smoke and stale raffia wine on his body and dress that had not been washed for some time. Below the jumper he had a cloth which he had passed between his legs and tied on his waist. A smoked raffia bag in which was his drinking horn and other accessories hung from his left shoulder. On the same shoulder behind the bag hung a sheathed cutlass. Mboh surveyed me carefully in the face.

“Little bird”, he said. “Skin of the leopard. Thank the gods they did not make Ngwi-nkem a laughing stock in the clan.” He held my hand and shook it. “Thank you my child. Thank you that you came,” he said. As he spoke, I glanced into his mouth. He had lost many of his teeth and his mouth was like a vacuum revealing thick brown gums with particles of colanuts dotted here and there. I hardly understood what he said. He had just put another lobe of colanut into his mouth and carefully directed it with his tongue to his inner jaws and chewed it. I was frightened and struggled to free myself from his grip. “Little bird, do you know me? How you resemble your father like the young horse”, he said still holding me firm. I gave a shrill cry. My mother who was in her house rummaging the remnants of the rubble rushed out and found me in the old man’s hands.

“Ah, Mboh, the child is with you?” my mother said.

“Yes, Ngwi-nkem,” said the old man. As he spoke he eased his grip and I fled to my mother. “He has run away...catch him

for me....,” cried the old man. I heard Mboh’s grumpy voice. My mother lifted me and put on her back.

“Ngwi-nkem, is he that our little bird?” he asked pointing towards me.

“Our little bird, Mboh,” my mother replied.

“I have seen him only once, the week he was born. How fast children grow!”

“The gods gave me this little one to wipe my tears, Mboh”, said my mother.

“The gods are kind”, said the old man throwing his hands towards the earth.

“And the boy looks intelligent. Is he going to school already?” asked the old man.

“Mboh, not my child. He is still breastfeeding,” said my mother going away.

“At what age, Ngwi-nkem?” shouted another elder.

“Is there a fixed age for breastfeeding?” asked my mother.

“Ngwi-nkem, thank the gods of the clan that you are all alive,” said the old man. My mother carried me away scolding me for getting so scared of Mboh. I had made her so terribly frightened thinking that I had probably been wounded.

Before the rays of the sun reached the plum tree where the old men sat talking ceaselessly, the young men were beginning to arrive with roofing material. Some carried sticks and ropes, others carried enormous bundles of raffia leaves which were to be woven for thatches. Some carried sticks, some so big that they had to be carried by two men. Meanwhile those who were clearing the debris had almost finished their work. They were sweeping the floors of the houses to round up. When all the young men had returned and everyone settled, the women and the girls brought baskets of pounded fufu and bowls of *nchie* and placed them in the middle of the courtyard. My father who was so busy came out and told two young men to bring the meat to the courtyard. It was one of his favorite goats that he had slaughtered for the meals. The young men set about cutting the meat into small pieces. When they had finished, one

of the old men under the plum tree asked the women to share the food as quickly as possible. He stood from his bamboo chair and went to the courtyard as if to share the food himself when one of the elderly women stopped him.

“Nkemageguo, go and sit down. Why are you always like this? You cannot share food when young people are around,” she said, and then shouted at the young men and women to come around and share the food. ”

“Nkemageguo,” said one of the old men as the man retreated to his seat. “The old monkey that sat on a rock to crack kernels will one day crack its own testes.”

“Have you become a woman?” another elder asked Nkemageguo.

“Nkemageguo looks like one who sleeps in a woman’s house,” said another.

“Where was he going to put his walking stick before sharing food,” asked another.

“Leave Nkemageguo alone,” said Mboh. “The mouth that has no teeth has only food to play with.”

The food was shared according to age groups, beginning with the elders who sat under the plum tree. This group of people was said to speak a common language with the gods of the clan. The fufu and *nchie* was served in wooden bowls and ancient calabashes. There were special parts meant only for such old men. The rest of the men were served, and after the women and then children. When everyone had been served meat, the man who cut the meat into tiny pieces folded a few pieces of what remained in a dry plantain leaf.

“Efuet, where are you going with that meat?” Nkemageguo asked with a shriek in his voice.

“Ndi Nkemageguo, the meat is finished,” replied one of the young men.

“Are you saying that Mbe Tanju-Ngong will slaughter a big goat...? A goat he called me and showed me... you give me a small thing like this?” Nkemageguo asked indicating the tip of his forefinger.

“Mbe, the meat is finished. Only the bones remain,” pleaded the young man.

“Bring the bones here,” said Nkemageguo.

“Aha!” cried one of the elders. “I will see how a cock will eat bones today.”

“Leave these children alone,” Mboh told Nkemageguo. “You should instead be asking if they who have been working all day have eaten enough food.”

Nkemageguo sat down trying to control an irritation. He was so angry that when raffia wine was served he refused to drink.

“Nkemageguo,” said Mboh. “No one ever refused to eat or drink in the place of the *levueh*. Mbe Tanju-Ngong’s ancestors cannot be kind to you if you refuse to eat or drink.”

“I have said I will not drink. These children should tell me whether it is wood ash I have rubbed on my head or something else,” Nkemageguo said, swallowing a heavy lump in his throat.

“If you do not drink, it will be said you came to the *levueh* of Mbe Tanju-Ngong with an evil mind, like the evil that has been done to him already”, said Mboh. Nkemageguo reflected and pulled out his horn from his smoked-tanned raffia bag and called for the young man to fill it.

The *levueh* continued for one native week, although not many people came to our compound again after the first day. But within that week our compound was ready for rehabilitation. I had become so used to the children in my father’s brother’s compound that I did not want to go back with my mother. She told me there was meat in the compound and I should go with her and eat it. I refused. She reflected for a while and said: “Friend, I have gone. I will tell Mboh to come and live here with you,” she said. I followed her without delay....

Urban noise woke me up to the realities of Manhattan. It was morning and the bright rays of the sun filtered into my apartment through the curtains. I sat on the edge of the bed

and hung my head low. I was sweating profusely and the counterpane was wet in some places. My feet trembled and I could not understand what force was shaking me. The world needed prayer, I told myself again and again. I prayed within me and hoped to go to church in the days ahead to pray for peace in the world.

Twenty-Four

The trip to Washington was scheduled for the following week. That was going to be the last major trip before the end of the pilgrimage. Kelly called to say she was visiting New York during the weekend. That same week end coincided with our trip. I informed her about the trip and she decided to postpone her visit.

All attempts to see my brother had failed. Besides, I had called the village the previous evening and I was told that my mother was very ill. There was some innate feeling of distaste that shrouded my mind. I tried to brush off certain possibilities, and as I went round the streets the skyscrapers appeared more like phantoms transformed by the dream into a nightmare. I was also worried that after a long stay in the United States I could not trace the man who had written emails to me with all assurances. My friend in the university in Texas had called a few nights before to say that he had done everything to fish out information about him; he had contacted a network of friends round the country but no person seemed to know the whereabouts of my brother. My friend had planned to visit Washington over the weekend. I was happy because it was going to coincide with our journey. We planned to meet in Washington on Saturday for what my friend in Texas said was an important discussion.

We started the journey on Friday morning. Many people were moving in and out of New York for the weekend. On the multi-lane carriageways a stream of cars dazzled in the glaze of the sunrise of summer morning, moving at a remarkably slow speed, observing speed limits and traffic rules with a lot of caution. The spirit of democracy, the respect for human rights and freedoms was quite glued in the consciences of men and women for whom the law became a creed; for those who worshipped and glorified the constitution.

In Washington we were lodged in Mayflower Hotel. After checking into our rooms, we bathed and changed dresses then went for lunch. My Texas friend was already in Washington. I received his call the moment we arrived and he planned with me to meet at the hotel at 6 p.m. after our visit to the World War Two Memorial and the Vietnam War Memorial. It was great joy to find an old friend. We hugged each other and told stories about our experiences from when we last met. What I wanted to hear most from him was whether he ever met my brother or heard any news about him. I believed he had some good information for me. He quickly brushed the issue aside by simply saying that he heard he went to prison and that was a long time ago and he didn't know in which city he was living at the time. And he resisted my attempts to come back to the topic which I thought was one of the major things that had brought him to Washington DC. He was concerned about something else.

"A university position in the US will be quite suitable for you," said my friend. "It's quite lucrative if you work hard."

"I understand," I said.

"And that's why I thought I should come to Washington and talk with you about it. If you make up your mind to stay at the end of the program I will come to New York to pick you up," he said.

"When it's settled in my mind I'll let you know," I said.

"Did you say you have less than two weeks in the program?" he asked.

"Ten days to be very precise," I said.

"Please, Kendem, do not miss this golden opportunity. Stay behind after your program, we'll work out papers for you, get you asylum position first, and then secure a green card and later citizenship. Easy to do if you make up your mind soon," my friend insisted. "See, I have been able to bring my whole family here within a very short time. And they are all faring well," he went on.

“Right, I’ll keep you informed,” I said and we fixed another meeting for Sunday after which my friend was to travel back to Texas.

We did not meet on Sunday because I broke away from the group to visit my in-laws on Saturday evening. Before my in-law picked me up at the hotel, we had visited the Holocaust Museum, the Air and Space Museum, the Capitol and the White House later that Saturday afternoon. My in-law drove straight to her residence where the other members of her family were waiting. She had prepared a special traditional meal which I ate with relish. For several months I had been completely cut off from familiar local meals.

“Are you going back to Cameroon?” my in-law asked. I waited for a while before answering.

“I’m still to decide,” I said.

“You have just ten days remaining and you haven’t decided?” she asked.

“I’m still thinking about it,” I said.

“Brother Kendem, don’t make a mistake. The US is the best place for you,” she said. You could stay with us when you’re done with NYU. We’ll get you settled.”

“I will make a decision by the end of next week and I will let you know,” I said looking at my watch. “It’s time for me to go”.

“Brother, you won’t go tonight. We would like you to see a bit of Maryland. We have arranged to take you to a wedding party and after that we will go to the nightclub,” she said. I made all attempts to object to the proposal but my plea was rejected and before long the two sisters-in-law were ready for the outing.

At the wedding party, I had a hint about my brother but no one could say precisely where he was. The stories I heard about him made my evening sour. It was said he was first in Maryland, caught in a drug deal, imprisoned but he escaped to Philadelphia, sent word that he had changed his name and passport and was then working in a retail shop in Philadelphia.

He got married to a white lady who sued him for raping her and was again imprisoned. He escaped from prison and no one knew his whereabouts again. The main informant promised to meet my brother's friend who knew every bit about his life but who unfortunately, was not present at the party.

We left the wedding party and went to an African nightclub where we danced till the early hours of the morning. Back in the hotel I fell in bed and woke from sleep only after midday. My friend called, but because I was too deep in sleep I could not answer. He traveled back to Texas without meeting me again. On Monday morning we visited the Capitol, the States Department and the White House. I was very amazed with the White House, a building surrounded by a beautiful garden of brightly colored flowers located in the streets. I had imagined a very sophisticated building located on a sacred part of Washington where even angels feared to approach. It dawned on me that the veritable symptoms of leadership were plainness and simplicity which I found in the White House. It was a big contrast with the Etoudi Palace located on a vast and secluded hill cut off from the society, surrounded by high walls and every nook and cranny guarded by thousands of fierce-looking presidential guards forever present at their posts in booths above the walls.

Before our return to New York my in-law called to give details about the whereabouts of my brother. He was in New York working in a fast food restaurant in a subway concourse around the Bronx. She gave details on how I could get to him. I was very thankful for the information and planned to surprise my brother as soon as I got back to New York. Throughout the journey I felt very uncomfortable about the ordeal my brother had gone through. I could not imagine that someone who obtained very bright results in secondary school and the university should become a hermit. I feared I might never meet him. The fact that he had stopped communicating with me meant that he might have committed another offence and escaped to another state, or he might have declared himself

bankrupt, and not being able to settle his creditors, moved to another city.

When we arrived in New York my immediate plan was to find out where he worked. I had been told that the best time to get him in the subway was before noon on Saturday when he usually received his stipend, and that he called but did not receive phone calls from people he did not know.

At 10 a.m. on Saturday I arrived at the concourse at Bronx. I turned around the shops, the bakeries and restaurants scrutinizing the face of each black I saw. I wondered if I could recognize him since it had been a long time we had not seen each other. I peeped into every corner, went to a number of fast food restaurants but could not trace him. My brother was either not working there anymore or I did not follow the proper directives given by my in-law. I felt tired and bored, found a seat and slumped into it and watched the trains glide in and out making creaking noises and shaking the foundations of the earth. I thought of going back to the Palladium but my limbs were too weak to permit me rise to my feet. For more than thirty minutes I sat there, my mind filled with thoughts. I was absent from the scene bustling with people with trains gliding in and stopping at the platform then gliding off after a couple of seconds as people rushed in while others rushed out and went towards different directions. The railway police might have been monitoring me. There was fear and insecurity looming everywhere. Within that period, there had been one or two terrorist attacks in the New York subways and the police was very alert. I did not think it befitting for me to be arrested for loitering in the subway with suspicious intentions. That thought brought me instantly to my feet and I became conscious again of the bustling activities of the subway, with trains gliding in and taking off. I reviewed the descriptions I had been given and there were visible signs that quite matched with them. I looked around again for the last time before giving up.

I found a fast food restaurant at the basement of a staircase that led up into the street. I went towards it. I had passed through the place a number of times and had not taken a careful look at it. I was expecting to find a big plush restaurant somewhere in an open place in the concourse. Rather I found a small place separated from the public by a wooden counter. Behind the counter some Asians putting on light blue aprons served the customers who queued up in front of them. A black fellow, who at the moment I could only see his back, concentrated on something he was preparing in a saucepan. He too wore an apron but it was white. I stood for a while and focused my gaze at the black fellow who took the saucepan in his hand in which was some kneaded stuff, shoved it forward and backward, spun it in the air and like a juggler he caught it in the saucepan, placed the saucepan on the gas stove and wiped his hands with a napkin. He took the saucepan again, shoved forward and backward, put its content on a platter, wrapped the stuff in a special way and put it in a disposable packet. He handed it to one of the Asians to serve a customer who was impatiently waiting at a corner. I marveled at the speed and dexterity with which the fellow did his job; a series of coordinated actions within a very short time and yet he was on to receive more orders and set again to task with the same coordinated perfection.

It was during this marionette display that I looked at the performer's face more closely. I would not have believed that the person I saw was my brother. The familiar looks of my father were still carefully labeled on his face; the deep dark eyes below furtive eyebrows, and the visible triangular shape of his jawbone. I waited until there were few customers left then went to his side of the counter. My brother came towards me directing me to the place where he thought I should place my order. At close range, he stopped, threw back his head and stared at me, wiped his face with the tail of the apron, looked at me again, turned around to have a quick look at the Asians, then came closer towards me.

“Hey folk, what a fucking hell are you doing here?” he said in a suppressed tone, then he moved to the stove, back to the counter then to the stove time and again cleaning his face with the tail of the apron. He removed his gloves, went over to an Asian sitting on the cashier’s desk, and whispered something to him and pointing towards my direction. The Asian nodded, then turned his head and gave a casual long stare at me.

“Hey folk, how did you git here?” asked my brother stepping out of the cubicle. I spread my arms to hug him but he brushed his hand aside and placed his on my shoulder, took me a little distance away from the restaurant. “You don’t have to make these folks know you are my brother and coming from Africa,” he whispered. “They don’t like folks coming from Africa,” he said further.

“For several months I have been looking for you,” I said. “What happened with the telephone number and the email address you gave me?” I asked.

“Brother Kendem, I’m sorry I lost contact with you. I got trapped. Brother, got trapped, y’know what I mean?” he said.

“But why didn’t you inform me?” I asked.

“It’s a long story, Brother. Long story, y’know what I mean?” he said.

“Tony, spending your whole day there?” asked a voice.

“Coming, baas,” said my brother turning and rushing away.

“Give me an appointment, then. When do you think you’ll be free?” I asked. My brother thought for a while.

“Say Wednesday evening. I’ll meet you in your apartment,” he said.

“If you don’t come, I’ll come here on Saturday to meet your boss and to tell him I am your brother coming from Africa,” I said.

“T-o-n-y! See, lots of clients already,” said the voice with irritation. I turned round to see the person. It was the Asian at the cashier’s desk whom my brother spoke to before coming to meet me. The Asian was looking angrily in our direction.

“Coming, baas,” said my brother stepping behind the counter.

“Let me have your telephone number,” I insisted. He scribbled it on a piece of paper and handed it to me saying “See you on Wednesday”.

He did not show up on Wednesday. I called him several times and he said he was very busy moving from one shift to the other and that he would get to me when he was freer. The program was coming to an end soon. I had not wanted to inform my brother about this. I knew that he would disappear from the scene to return only when I was gone. I called him to find out why he did not come and to know when he intended to come and meet me.

“It’s not easy here, man,” he said.

“I know. I want us to talk for just an hour or two and you can get back to business,” I said.

“Okay, I’ll give you a ring. See what I mean? I’ll give you a fucking ring,” he said.

“It’s okay. But this should be before Sunday. Failure to do so I’ll meet your boss and tell him who you are,” I said.

“Alright Brother Kendem. Make it Sunday afternoon. I meet you at the Palla what?”

“Palladium.”

“Alright I’ll meet you there and we c’n move around and have booze. See what I mean?”

He called on Sunday. He was already waiting downstairs in the lobby of the Palladium when he called. I went downstairs to meet him, took him to my apartment and served him some snacks and drinks.

“I’ve been trying to get in touch with you since I arrived in the US. The phone number and the email address you gave me, none worked. What happened?” I asked. He put down his head and stared at the floor, drawing a cross on the carpet with the tip of his shoes. “What happened, brother?” I asked again.

“I got messed up, Brother,” he said as if waking from a dream. “And I didn’t want nobody to know where I was.”

“What happened? What messed you up?” I asked.

“I got messed up. Badly messed up,” he said.

“What really happened, brother?” I asked.

“Long story, bro. I was jailed, double jailed,” he said.

“Jailed, you said?” I asked.

“Twice slammed in jail,” he said shaking his head. “Let’s not talk about that no more. I feel mad thinking about it, y’know what I mean?” We were quiet for a moment and he constantly looked at his watch.

“You said you divorced with your white wife and that we should look for a young Nweh girl for you. She’s been on our necks since we started the affair. She wants the matter to be concluded as soon as possible so that she can meet you here in the US,” I said.

“I needed some time for myself, to start off again. Brother, thank God I’m alive,” he said.

“But you never told us about all this. We believed that you were fine here,” I said.

“That’s our way in the US of A, man. No bloody ass ever says he’s going down the drain. It’s always “I’m doing great”. Always say “It’s gonna be alright”. Y’know what I mean? Everything outa be alright,” he said gesticulating.

“Where do you live?” I asked. He gave a little start and was quiet for a while.

“In th’ Bronx. In th’ fucking Bronx. Y’know what I mean?” he said.

“When are you taking me there?” I asked.

“Where’s that?” he asked.

“Where you live in the Bronx. I can’t come to the US and return without visiting your home,” I said.

“Shet! I’m not gonna have no fucking time for that. I’ve got shifts, man, fucking shifts upon shifts of work to do so I c’n git back my pulse. Know what I mean?” he said.

“But you wanted me to stay with you after the program. How did you intend to host me?” I asked.

“Alright, I will give you a ring,” he said looking at his watch again and again.

“Fix a day within this week. If I don’t see you I will visit your workplace on Saturday and talk with your boss.

“Okay, make it Wednesday evening. Is that okay?” he said.

“It’s okay, I said. We left the Palladium and went to the streets, visited a few places and he hurried off promising to meet me on Wednesday.

On Wednesday he came at 4.15 p.m. and took me to the Bronx. We moved from one street to the other until we were walking at a far end of the street, entered a compound in which was an old building, went round towards the south side and entered through the back door and down to the basement.

“Come right down, Brother Kendem, come right down into the apartment,” he said looking around. He led me through a narrow corridor, past a couple of doors then tapped and opened one of them and went into the room. He closed the door as soon as I slipped in. “I don’t want no mother-fucker to know I’m here. Y’know what I mean?” he said after both of us were securely seated in the house.”

“Why shouldn’t they know?” I asked looking at my brother enquiringly.

“There’re all a bunch of mad folks. Y’know? I mean, mad folks who don’t wanna mind no business of theirs.” It was a small room with a bed poorly dressed up, a settee with one leg broken and parts of the leather torn. A few other single chairs of different make stood in odd placement. Objects were thrown about carelessly and there was no evidence of any person living there permanently. My brother did not quite master the place himself. I watched him fidget with one object and the other and looking around the room as if he were coming there for the first time too.

“Two of us live here,” he said. “Five hundred dollars for this bloody room down in the pit. I’m thinking of moving to a bigger apartment by the end of the month. Quite a beautiful place, the new place,” he said.

“Where is your friend?” I asked.

“He’s a soccer player gone camping. Let’s have a booze in the neighborhood,” he said, stood up and went hurriedly towards the door. I stood too and followed him to the door, climbed the winding staircase to the ground floor, passed through the back door and stepped onto a small backyard. I tried to look around but he hurried away. We moved out of the premises and came out into the streets. He felt more relaxed and spoke more comfortably. I walked by his side and listened to him say a number of unconnected things, hopefully to keep company. I could not still believe what I had seen about my brother. It was not a dream. It was a nightmare. Yet I could still not believe it. I could not believe that all the glory my brother had built in his imagination had turned out to be the horrifying nightmare he was experiencing at that moment.

“Why don’t you think of going back home and starting a small business, even with a small restaurant like the one you work in? Things could be better there,” I said. He laughed in the most astonishing manner.

“Brother, I c’n not. Who’s gonna let the folks over there know I got messed up in the United States. That’s a dream. I c’n not. I’m here. Things gonna be better for sure,” he said laughing again.

I felt deep pity for him. His dreams and aspirations were still far away from reality. I wasn’t sure if he would ever attain them. He had become a stranger to his native home and fugitive in his newfoundland. He was the tired and the poor. He was among the world’s huddled masses yearning to break free, yearning to live in America, the powerful beacon of hope.... He was the hungry and the thirsty, the weary and the detested in search of a better home in the world....

“I may not see you again before my departure,” I said.

“Oh, are you leaving soon?” he asked so surprised that I was thinking of leaving at all.

“On Sunday,” I said.

“You mean you really wanna go back to that goddamned country?” he asked.

“Sure. I am going back home after the program. It is my country. No one ever detests home. You can only strive to make it a better place to live in,” I said.

“Is it because you couldn’t find me in time?” he asked.

“Far from that. This is not my home. I came here for a cultural exchange program. It’s coming to an end soon and I have to go home when it ends,” I said.

“I believe you may be better off here. Y’know what I mean? If you got a good job here. Easy for a baas like you who’s read lots of the books. Y’know?” You don’t oughta make faces with a dead man while cleaning his corpse, don’t oughta strip off the old guy who’s pooped in his pants in care homes. You oughta get a better job. Good job that pays. You just need to say “Hey men, I’m not gonna fly no more to nowhere” and that’s all. You’ll get a better job,” he said.

“I’m going home. You stay well and consider improving your life. If it doesn’t work, come back home,” I said.

“I’ll do my best, Brother. So glad to see you again. Ah, I almost forgot. How is Mum? Is she doing well? Tell her I will see her someday,” he said. “Huh, my mum! I miss her so much. I hope to see her someday.”

“Aren’t you sending her a present?” I asked.

“I’ll do so, Brother, but not now. I’ll bring her lots of things when I’m coming home. I swear t’ God, I’ll make her proud. Oh, my darling mum! How I miss her!” he said.

“And what are you saying about the wife you asked us to look for you? She is very restless. She wants to come and meet you. And in the state in which you are, do you think we should bother about her anymore?” I asked.

“Of course, she’s my wife. She’ll get used to things once she arrives. Lots of greetings to her. I’ll give you a present for her before you leave,” he said.

“Good bye, brother. If I don’t see you again do well to improve your life. If things can’t work come back home,” I said.

“I got what you said, Brother. I’ll keep to my word. Greet everyone. But don’t bother to tell anyone about how I live here. Y’know what I mean?” he said waving. I flipped my ticket through the machine and entered the platform. While I waited for the train I turned instinctively to have the last look at him. He was now moving with the airs of a hip-hop monster, cruising on the path of imagined glory and against the background of the plain reality of his woes.

Twenty-Five

I met my brother after searching for him for close to a year. He had designed a pattern of life for himself and when I met him face to face, he decided to be very frank about it. He was very determined to pursue life goals best known to him alone. That was a life, a life in the shadows, a life that was sheltered by the darkest side of daylight. He had certainly overcome it and had become an anti-hero in the crude comic scene of the eternal drama of struggle. Life had become to him a fatal game, a game of winning and losing but more of losing than winning. And he seemed to enjoy the losing than the winning and could narrate his ordeals with such uninspiring ease. He had given away the substance and moved with his shadow, moving from one dark shade to the other.

My vision became blurred and there was a sour taste in my mouth. I stood at the window of my apartment watching the clocks on the towers across the street. The seconds, the minutes and the hours seemed to stretch out longer than usual. Home was still far away, farther than the hands of the clock that turned with deliberate deferment. The second hand struck the next target then quavered slightly backwards as if to resist advancement, struck the next target in the same consistent movement...Tick-tock-tick... My grandfather's clock was too large for the shelf...So it stood ninety years on the floor.... Tick-tock-tick....His life's seconds numbering...tick-tock-tick.... Uncle Sam's clock was too tall for the floor.... So it stood thousand years on a tower... Tick-tock-tick.... His life's seconds numbering...tick-tock-tick....

I took my diary and counted the number of days left. One, two, three, four, then removed my passport and my flight ticket from my hand bag and examined them closely to be sure that I had not mistaken the date of departure. I lay in bed,

spread out myself, trying to envision how the last days would look like.

Kelly had sent me a hot email complaining that I had made no effort to call, talk less of sending an email. She said she felt disappointed with my attitude. I sympathized with her but my mind was no longer in the realm of passion. The beginning of every passion is always hot but soon reaches a dead-end when even the fairest of couples can barely tolerate each other. And sometimes disengaging from any emotional attachment was more difficult than committing suicide. I started putting my baggage together. And since then I watched the hands of Uncle Sam's clock turn and I scrutinized my ticket several times every day that passed.

The tour of Queens was our last trip in the United States. I hummed the song...my grandfather's clock...as I set about preparing for the trip. The tour was a brief one. We visited the most opulent parts of New York City, where the bourgeoisie lived, visited the Orthodox Church and chatted with the monks and priests and ended with a visit to Queens New York Television. A panel discussion had been planned for recording and members of the group nominated were to take part, coordinated by a journalist. The program title was "Politics and You" and the panelists were supposed to talk about their stay in New York University.

Four members of the group were required to form the panel. As soon as the journalists asked for nominees, a number of voices cried out: "Ken, Ken, Ken!" I did not like to be part of the television panel because I had come to discover that people everywhere were not happy when one was open and frank. I had struggled hard to avoid any confrontations and had to be careful in this last moment. I had never known how to be political. I had the ideas and spoke them straight. Truth mattered more to me than anything else. Yet not many people were friendly with the Truth. I had found myself sidelined because I could not play the common game of giving wrong impressions, of saying things that are pleasing to the ears but at

the very basis of it, it was cutting off the roots. That was the direction towards which the world was drifting, leaving me alone in chaotic uprightness. I didn't want to be pushed to say things that would sound offensive to people, worst of all in a public medium. Salty phlegm constricted my throat. I pushed it up into my mouth with the intention of going to the restroom to spit it out. But with the pressure on me to form part of the television panel I was forced to swallow it.

"Ken, please, represent us," pleaded Indira and Terkiyana. I made up my mind to go, dragging myself on as I climbed onto the podium. I knew only one thing that was true. And that was the Truth, one thing that could never be successfully twisted. The Truth always prevailed no matter how it is twisted by political maneuvers or diplomatic machinations. I lay in front of Truth and took an oath within me to say whatever the Truth was. The world was the way it was because the virtues of Truth had been ignored. I stood on the platform waiting for the other three panelists to be nominated while the television crew set the stage ready for the recording. Frances, Bangla, Cyna joined me on the podium. We began with self-introduction off media while the journalists took down notes. When the recording started the journalist introduced everyone in the order we had introduced ourselves. Then he set forth questioning the objectives of our mission in the US and what we had achieved so far. We discussed at length about the triumphs of civilization and international politics. Then the journalist now focused on me.

"Kendem, Am I right?" he asked.

"Sure," I replied.

"Did you achieve anything during your stay?" asked the journalist.

"A lot. Quite a lot."

"What precisely?"

"I've understood the world a hundred times better. It's been a really amazing experience living and interacting with peers from different parts of the world and visiting the

landmarks of civilization in the United States. I think it's been quite an experience – informative, educative, entertaining and refreshing. I was happy to be on the research trail of the civilization of the greatest nation on earth and I am very thankful to our sponsors.” I said.

“Africa has chronic problems of poverty and civil strife and wars. What lessons are you taking back to Africa?”

“I don't believe Africa has ever been poor,” I said. The journalist leaned forward with a jerk and stared at me.

“I don't believe you either,” he said narrowing his eyelids and stretching back in his chair.

“The African continent has never been poor,” I said again. Despite attempts by the journalists to make me explain what I meant by Africa not being poor I couldn't say more than I intended. I feared journalists, especially such high profile journalists. They could easily induce me into error and I would end a very enlightening stay in the United States with a last minute dose of ridicule in a television program. The journalist gave up and engaged another topic with other members of the panel but my mind was bothered about the issues. I had long considered Africa's *wahala* as an age-long trick to deprive the dog of its bone. It was like grabbing a man's riches and turning around again to condemn him for being poor. Africa is a continent that was and it is still endowed with the riches of the world. But what happened to Africa? What happened to Africa which in its primal age was endowed with God's abundant blessings? The thought about it created blisters in the mind whenever one thought about the worst of the crimes committed against the continent – slave trade, colonization, globalization.... Would there have been any need for the European scramble for Africa in the late 19th century if Africa had been poor? Would there have been need to partition Africa and segment it into exploitable units, and loot its rich resources with violence in the name of the “civilizing mission” if Africa had been poor? Would there have been any use storming the African continent to cart away millions upon millions of its

potent sons and daughters and subjecting to them forced labor and inhuman treatment over the ages in the plantations and the factories of the worlds, to build those worlds under very callous conditions? How could we now turn around today to say Africa is poor as if it were a curse from God? How could anyone say Africa was poor when the continent had suffered centuries of galling indignities, centuries of plundering and looting of her resources to reconstruct old civilizations and to build new ones? Talking about civil strife and wars in Africa, could there be wars in Africa if there was no bloodshed in other continents. By the way, who was responsible for civil strife and wars in Africa? How far could Africa go when her heroes, her philosophers, and scientists were eliminated through the very conspiracy of those who claimed to champion the civilizing mission? What had happened to Ivory Coast? What had happened in Togo? What had happened in the Central African Republic? What had happened in Rwanda? Chad? Libya? Could anyone one understand the fuel that ignited the Rwanda genocide? And who doubted the daunting seismic tremor under the feet of my country people? Was it not only a matter of time? And then the darkness? Unfortunate Africa! It had become the testing ground for all kinds of *ojoro* to satisfy some dark animal instinct....

“Kendem, what struck you most during your stay?” said the journalist after interacting with other members of the panel.

“What struck me most....,” I said, coming back to myself and quickly thinking of what to say. “America is a great nation, beautiful cities, incomparable scientific and technological development, respect for the law, popular culture.... It’s a remarkable country, guarantees respect for one and all,” I said. The journalist appeared not very satisfied with my answer, and realizing that I wasn’t saying more turned to Bangla and asked the same question. He was in fact rounding off the discussion and when every member of the panel had taken his or her turn he thanked us for participating in the program and wished us safe return to our countries.

I left the studio feeling that I had probably said some irrelevant things that would inspire some members of the group to want to ridicule me. We moved into the subway and no one said anything about the panel discussion. Even those who had pressured me to join the panel were careful saying anything to me. I found my seat and took a careful look of the faces of those who sat opposite me. I tried to pry into their minds but it was difficult to guess what they were thinking. A dim gaze filled my vision and the people sitting opposite me looked like painted pictures on a Sunday school brochure, or like the shadows behind the door at noon. That was the way the world was, the way the world had become.

It was Indira who disturbed my vision when she talked to Lebanajjar about his conduct in the studio.

“That wasn’t kind of you, Lebanajjar,” she said.

“What was that, Indira?” asked Lebanajjar.

“I mean, when you lay on your back on the table while the discussion was going on. The guys weren’t happy,” said Indira. At that moment we came out of Union Square and went to the Palladium.

That evening my friend in Texas called. He wanted to know if I had made up my mind to stay in the US.

“I’m sorry, but I’m going back home,” I said.

“See, Kendem, you’re my friend and I can’t deceive you. This is a very good opportunity for you to become a US citizen. If you make an error you will regret forever,” he said.

“I came only for a visit. And I’m so grateful I was given the opportunity to participate in the program. I’m now going back home. I can’t betray the confidence which my benefactors bestowed on me,” I said.

“Kendem, think well over this issue and take the right decision,” he said. “It’ll be easy. We will arrange for asylum status for you. You are a writer and we will easily convince the authorities that your government wants your head,” he went on.

“Dear friend, I have made up my mind. I’m leaving for home in two days. I don’t want to....” I did not finish what I wanted to say when my friend dropped the line. I put down the receiver and sat back in my chair. I had no remorse for sounding a little too frank. The road to freedom was too hard to define. Asylum, political or otherwise.... It could be either way. I preferred to be a prince of poverty rather than a slave of riches. I had to leave the US to my country. The US was some other people’s country and I went there by the benevolence of the US government. I could not disappear within the great country and abuse the confidence. I could not abuse the goodwill of the US government who invited me to their country, paid my flight tickets, lodged me, took me round the country to interesting sights which a good number of Americans themselves had never had the opportunity to experience, brought me into contact with very renowned professors and thinkers, inspired me to return to my home country and build it, make it comfortable too for existence as they had done with theirs; in brief showed me the light, showed me civilization, showed me the world through the sixteen other pilgrims with whom I had spent months together. How could I abuse this goodwill? Why wasn’t I thinking of using the experience I gathered in the US to develop my own country? It was quite an enriching experience and my country needed it. It came to my mind that I had to send an email to my friend Zengu to pick me up at Nsimalen Airport on my arrival.

The farewell party took place on Saturday evening; that was the evening before departure day. It took place in Bill Host’s apartment down at Washington Square. It was a moderate apartment on the fifth floor with a small parlor, two bedrooms, a study, a kitchen, toilet and bath. It was one of the apartments given out to professors by the university. Bill Host showed us round the apartment and I was amazed at the simplicity in which renowned professors lived. There was no formality. Food and drinks were open to self-service. And

when Bill Host took the floor to thank the pilgrims for the collaboration they had shown, wishing them safe return to their home countries and hoping that the experience they had gained in the United States was going to be of use in their communities, it became very clear to most of the pilgrims that the great moments lived in the United States had come to an end.

A particular case was Kanadia. Some attention was being paid to her by Meiriv, Shizuka and Alejandra and later Bill Host and his wife. The story quickly went round that Kanadia was very ill. She refused to eat or drink anything. She looked sullen and exasperated to the point that a suggestion for medical attention was made. She objected to it, stifling entreaties of those attending to her. I could understand, like a few others did, the reason for her illness. Her mind was smarting. The hands of Uncle Sam's clock had turned too fast for her. The great times in the United States had come to an end too soon and she and Lebanajjar were parting ways. The next morning both lovers were to fly in opposite directions. Flight schedules and destinations stood between them like the deep oceans they were to cross on their way back home. Time had not been so kind to the apostles of love. Time had been a traitor. It severed the strings that had bound hearts together. Lebanajjar had stayed briefly at the farewell party then went out. He was soon back fidgeting with himself, eating very little and looking slightly innerved. He stole a quick curious look at Kanadia, then put down his head moodily. A couple of days before, the media had carried a main news item about a savage confrontation between his country and its neighbor. Rockets and mortar shells were fired across borders on the mid-eastern shores causing the deaths of thousands of souls in his country. It was rumored that Lebanajjar had applied for asylum status, to spend some time in the United States until a truce was negotiated between his country and its neighbor but his request had been turned down. Late into the evening we were issued

certificates of participation alongside gifts. That was my last evening in New York and the United States of America.

The following day was Sunday. I fidgeted with my baggage. Immediately after our return from Washington I started putting my things together – three pieces of baggage, two for the carrier and one hand baggage. Each day I added something in one or removed from one and put in the other, balancing, and weighing in my hand, hoping the baggage did not exceed the maximum weight. That Sunday morning while some members of the group called me to help them in solving one problem or the other, I always rushed back to adjust my baggage, take a look at my flight ticket to reassure myself of the time the plane was taking off. My flight was at 6 p.m. As I pulled my baggage out of the Palladium I stopped and cast a glance back at the door of my apartment, then at the hallway with its blue carpeting and row of florescent lights that still filled me with mesmerizing awe. I entered the elevator and went downstairs where I exchanged handshakes with the campus police, waited for Tunis-Aziz for a few moments. We had agreed to take the same taxi to the John F. Kennedy Airport since we were traveling at the same time in the same flight to Brussels. When he came down with his baggage we hired a taxi which took us to the airport. We arrived at 4 P.M. and met the usual crowds ever arriving or traveling to different destinations.

It was check-in time and we hurried around looking for the check-in desk for Delta Airlines. Some airport official informed us that Delta Airlines had arranged with Air France to fly its passengers. Only a few minutes were left for the gates to be closed. We hurried to Air France desk, checked in and rushed towards the departure gate and boarded the plane. As the craft taxied, and started its ascend to the sky, I looked through the window and saw the last glimpse of New York. New York, the magnificent city! What a paradise on earth! I will miss you forever. I may never have another opportunity to visit you again. New York City, you have been my teacher and my

mentor, my host and my caretaker. You brought the world towards me and I saw things beyond the realms of my imagination, beyond the realms of the little confinement in my country. Only that my brother has remained stuck in your bosom, not finding a way out in the vastness of civilization and my mother will never be at peace with herself if I never tell her anything good about him. Worst still, I had been informed that she was very ill. How was she to receive the news about her first son?

I folded my arms, leaned back in my seat, closed my eyes and stared in the direction of home. We transited at Brussels where I parted with my friend, Tunis-Aziz. The muscular and jocular fellow had been a great companion. Our flight was delayed till morning. The large Brussels Airline vessel was flying to various destinations in Central and West Africa. For close to seven hours the sound of the Boeing tearing through space remained the only significant factor that kept my senses alive. As it landed at the Nsimalen Airport, Yaounde looked like an immense old village that had been ransacked or had suffered from the tremors of the earth. The city spread out like mounts of debris scattered on vast territory, with shiny sheets of aluminum embracing the wrath of the afternoon sun. I knew what lay beneath that view. I knew what sly old monster crouched on a ridge, on the lair of the nation's fortunes. I knew what silence hung over the folk's persistent anguish. I had to stay quiet if I knew my head still had any value for its trunk.

The plane landed with a bump and sped off the runway as if it were fleeing from an ambush in the surrounding bushes, then gradually reduced its speed until it anchored at a terminal. That was the country, my country. I had returned to face its usual inconsistencies – the intransigent police officers searching for benefits, the restive health officials screening and negotiating with defaulters of vaccination cards, the ennui of the customs, the *feymen* positioning themselves to strike deals, the muddle and jumble of people, the stops and take-offs of taxis and the rush of idlers in and out of the airport building.

That was my country, *berceau de nos ancêtres*, our *terre Chérie* shrouded in the darkest night before dawn.... I heard my voice coming out louder and stronger, my limbs ready to carry me through all impediments, through all the *wahala*.

“Dokta, I’m here already,” shouted my friend, Zengu. He had spotted me as soon as I had clearance from the customs. He pushed himself through the crowd and hugged me, helped me carry my baggage into his car and we drove off into the city.

I was back in my office the next day, poring at the cracks on the floor, the dust that had invaded the whole room and the increasing traces of the leakages on the wall. But that was more real than a nightmare, the reality of my country. I called the village to find out about my mother’s health and I was told she was still very ill. I decided to visit the village before the end of the week, the major burden in my mind being how to reveal my brother’s situation to her....

Twenty-Six

“Child, I had given up waiting for you believing that the father of the land had asked you to spend the night in the palace,” said my mother.

“No, Mami, I stayed on to listen to the deliberations on matters of the land,” I said. There were a number of people in the parlor when I arrived. Everyone wanted to know what decision the fathers of the land had taken on the chief of Beyano’s controversy. I couldn’t reveal any information. *Lefem* was a sacred place and its sessions were conducted in secret, no matter where it was held. And I had to observe the rules. We conversed till late into the night when the visitors left. But my mother again broke the cheerful mood of the evening.

“You have not yet talked with your father,” she said. “Tell me why things will not happen to you as they have happened to my first child. Your father and the rest of your ancestors are very kind to all of you. If not many more things would have gone wrong. How do you think that a big homestead like that of Mbe Tanju-Ngong can survive without a head? Everyone believed that your brother would return soon. You have gone to Ameleka and returned, saying nothing about him. You cannot hide burning charcoal in your palms, my child. I fear the curse of the ancestors”, she said in a grievous tone.

My mind went back to the ancestral shrine. Could my brother’s fate be a result of an ancestral curse? How could this be corrected if that were the case? There was something deep in my mother’s mind that was painfully grinding away her peace even when I thought my presence would make her happy. And that kept me a little distressed. The way she left for her house late that night made me think that she was undergoing some severe agony which I feared might worsen her health situation. I wasn’t giving her any concrete information about my brother and she was probably at pains to

know that all might not be well with him. My mother did not know how much pain I suffered trying to trace the whereabouts of my brother. She was of age and knew the bad spots on the path of time more than I could with all my education. She wanted me to visit the shrine, may be as a way of atonement for my father and the other ancestors.

It was often said the ancestors were just around the homestead watching the affairs of the living and putting order where there was need. And to maintain a hitch-free existence they required that homesteads and individuals made regular visits to the shrine for personal or collective union with them. Now that my father was dead my elder brother who was his successor was the right person to perform the ritual for the family. My father had initiated him in the customs of the people more than any of us and made him successor. Could my father's anger be trailing him wherever he was? And was I competent to utter incantations on his behalf?

"Child, do not become the naughty child who refused to take the advice of Emehnden and caused his own destruction," said my mother. She planted her ankles on her thighs, held her chin in her hands and covered her eyes. I tried to decipher what was in her mind and my thoughts went back to the story of Emehnden. When we were children sitting by the fire side in the evening after the day's work had been done or after we had eaten our evening meals and we were preparing to go to bed, my mother would tell us stories. One of the stories she just referred to was the story of Emehnden. It was the story of two children who went at different times to look for a missing calabash in the stream and met Emehnden. The two children lived with a woman and her husband. One of the children was their real son and the other was an orphan. The woman took good care of her son and maltreated the orphan. It was the orphan who did everything in the house, split wood, washed calabashes, went on all the errands and was denied the right to play even when he was not doing anything. But the other boy had all the time to play and eat. Sometimes he punished the

orphan at the request of his mother who would beat the orphan cruelly for minor offences.

One day the boy went to the stream to wash calabashes and the current carried away one of the calabashes. He returned home and told the woman. The woman beat him and sent him back to the stream to search for the calabash or she was going to peel off his skin. The boy cried and begged but the woman beat him and sent him out of the house. He went far downstream, into the rough and dangerous part of the stream looking for the calabash, crying. Emehnden, an old woman, who lived in a hut downstream called him.

“Child, what are you doing in this terrible place alone?” she asked.

“I am looking for my mother’s calabash which the stream carried away,” said the boy.

“Is that why you are crying?” asked the old woman.

“Yes grandmother. My mother said that she will peel off my skin if I do not bring back the calabash,” said the boy.

“Stop crying, child. Come and live with me and I will help you look for the calabash,” said Emehnden. The boy followed her to a dilapidated thatched house in the forest near the stream. While there, the boy did all that Emehnden asked him to do, repaired her roof, gathered firewood, and weeded the farm. Sometimes Emehnden told the boy that she was going to a distant farm, then she would transform into a girl return to the hut and ask the boy to play with her. The boy would refuse saying that he had to complete the work he was doing before his grandmother returned from the farm. Emehnden was very happy with the boy and they lived together for some time.

One morning the old woman called him and told him that it was time for him to return to their home. The boy cried and cried because he could not return home without the calabash. If he did he would be beaten to death by his foster parents.

“The calabash is under my bed,” Emehnden told him. Go and collect it. You will also find many eggs there. The ones that say ‘Take me, take me’ do not take them. Any one that says

‘Do not take me,’ take that one. Put the egg in the calabash and go back home with it. When you reach home, gather the people you know in a field and break the egg on the ground.”

“Thank you” said the boy, went and took the calabash and the egg and went back home, called all his friends and the people he knew including his foster father and mother and did what Emehnden had told him. He hit the egg on the ground and the egg scattered. All kinds of precious things came out. The boy became very rich and respected in the village. The woman who had sent him away from the house became envious of him and decided to send her own son to the stream with the calabashes so that water current would carry one of them downstream. The boy went downstream to look for the calabash and met Emehnden.

“Child, what are you looking for,” asked Emehnden.

“My mother has sent me to look for a calabash that the stream carried away,” said the boy.

“Come home with me and I will help you look for the calabash,” said Emehnden. The boy followed her reluctantly to her hut and waited outside for the old woman to bring out the calabash.

“Child, come in and rest while I look for the calabash,” said Emehnden.

“No,” said the boy shaking his head. “You look very frightful and your hut is very nasty. Give me the calabash and let me go. The old woman left him there and transformed into a charming little girl and returned. The boy played with her until it was night and he could not return. The girl left him and transformed again into the old woman and returned. The boy cried the whole night wanting to go back to their house. The old woman pleaded with him to stay on till morning and she would give him the calabash.

Early the following morning, the boy was still crying and the old woman told him to go under her bed and collect the calabash.

“Child, you will find many eggs near the calabash under the bed that would say ‘Take me, take me.’ You will not take any of those. Take but the egg that says ‘Do not take me, do not take me.’ Do not take more than one egg. Put the egg in the calabash and when you arrive home call all your relations and friends to a field and break the egg on the ground,” said the old woman. The boy went under the old woman’s bed and collected the calabash and took many of the eggs that said “Take me, Take me” and rushed home without saying goodbye to the old woman. At home he showed his mother what he had brought and what the old woman had told her. His mother was very happy that her son had brought more eggs. They were going to become richer than the orphan. She invited only very close family relations and friends to share her joy. When they were gathered in a field, the boy hit the eggs on the ground and broke them. All kinds of dangerous animals came out of the eggs – pythons and leopards, and devoured everyone present....

My mother coughed then sat still, her eyes were still closed and I could guess that her mind was busy with some profound thoughts. After a while she raised her head and spoke without looking in my direction. It was as if she was talking to herself.

“Mbe Tanju-Ngong’s household is not at peace with itself,” she said. “And your elder brother whose role it is to bring it together abandoned your father’s stool, his wives and his many children. The Gods cannot be happy with the household. And things are still to happen. I hardly sleep these days without having a bad dream. I fear the *ndoh* of the ancestors on your elder brother and the rest of the family. We shall not wait until there is a calamity before we start racing across the countryside to look for solutions.” She covered her eyes again and let her head drop until I could see the grey-white tufts of hair in the middle of her head.

Twenty-Seven

Early afternoon on Saturday, *Alena*, the road to Beyano village was filled with people. Men, women and children were clad in assorted traditional regalia. The women carried food in flasks and the children who were happy that there was no school on that day carried jugs of raffia and palm wine, crates of beer and other ceremonial items. And as we moved towards the palace the crowds became thicker and thicker. There were rumors that the corpse had been brought very close to the Beyano palace and people moved faster to catch a glimpse of what was going to happen. The question everyone asked was: who were the bearers of the coffin? Were they the children of the late chief who had insisted that they were going to give their father a Christian burial or the traditional authorities who insisted that the chief was going to undergo rituals according to the customs of the people? Even at that moment the answer was not yet clear. Even Bombabili was not so sure about it. As we moved along, the only information he could provide was that Nyontsebeng had been sent to give some instructions to the late chief's children. It was not clear whether or not those instructions were respected.

I walked fast, Bombabili walked faster and I struggled each time to catch up with him. He had talk on his lips, trying to guess what the outcome would be. We passed men, women and children on the way, went down the valleys, crossed the streams, climbed the hills, walked on the narrow edge of the cliffs, sat on the boulders for brief a rest, turned onto the main road until we entered a wide expanse of the forests dominated by aged palm trees. By the time we arrived in Beyano palace the whole environment was filled with people. It was a large compound consisting of several houses and a main one which stood at a center behind an expanded courtyard which was going to serve as the ceremonial ground, hemmed on the right

by thick undergrowth which hosted the *Lefem*. In Nweh tradition, a chief's status is also determined by the expanse of his courtyard and the thickness of the undergrowth, the *Lefem*. The palace was filled with people, with color and pomp. The dignitaries were already seated according to ranks and traditional standing. Title holders, chiefs, *bekem* and *bemafuo* had their places well designated which accorded with their antic and elaborate chieftaincy regalia. The elite too had their own seating arrangement but I did not want to bother anyone to look for a seat for me. Bombabili pressed me to sit in one of the shades but I decided to stand at the top of a little hill from where I could see every move. It was a slippery slope and I struggled with other onlookers to have a clear view of the palace courtyard.

The palace was filled with dissonant noises but the deep sonorous rhythm of the wooden drum dominated the noisy space. The noise of the drum came from the little hut near the *Lefem* at the main entrance of the palace. And the domineering sound of the wooden drum went on and on communicating in a language which could only be understood and interpreted by those who mastered tradition. The drummer wrought a variation of rhythms with lapses and one could hear the rhythm resonating into the valleys.

"The drums have spoken very clearly. A chief has disappeared, his shadow has been caught and it is being brought back home," said a man standing very close behind me. I turned and looked at him in the face. He was an elderly man who interpreted the message of the drums. The drums were played again but the rhythm had changed. "The spirit of the chief is being brought home and anyone daring to stand as a stumbling block in body or spirit should be sure of their destruction," said the man again giving a further interpretation of the drum's message. By the time he finished his statement there were a series of scurry movements and the occasional shouts by someone hurrying across the courtyard giving

instructions, his raffia bag slung from his right shoulders, through the trunk resting on his left hip.

Just then there was a discordance of wailing voices followed by a commotion and all heads were raised towards one direction. A coffin was being borne down towards the palace by several hefty and muscular men. Before the coffin and its bearers came to full view, the masked figures, *betrob*, dressed in ancient regalia, especially of woven raffia fabrics that had been dyed in exotic black color, appeared from the sacred grove, seized the coffin, throwing down some of the carriers and disappeared into the innermost part of undergrowth. Some of the children of the late chief wanted to fight back but their effort was so feeble that they quickly resigned and instead went about crying and beating themselves about the courtyard. They were immediately brought to order. The man behind me explained that mourning in any form was forbidden because the chief had not died. Anyone caught weeping was going to run into trouble with the masked figures. The whole palace was now as quiet as an evil forest except for the occasional grunting and guttural sounds produced by *betrob*, the mask figures, some of who returned to the courtyard stomping the earth with the long dark mystical staffs they were carrying and checking if anyone was violating the sacred moment. The wooden drums started speaking again, deep and sonorous. The rhythm had changed and the man behind me interpreted each rhythm: "The message is clear. Fuo Beyano has not died. He has merely disappeared. He will be found soon and brought back to the palace...." People stood in small groups talking in whispers, speculating, guessing while some of the notables and kingmakers rushed in and out of the courtyard.

It was difficult to tell what was happening or what was to happen next. A solemn atmosphere had suddenly imposed itself and no one was saying anything, only movements and discussions in low voices. I was completely cut off from the self and the environment. I yearned to re-establish the connection. I wanted to know what was happening. I wanted

to know what had become of the children and those who had opposed traditional rituals; I wanted to know what was happening with the coffin that had been seized by the masked figures. There was a dire urge in me to move into the inner part of the palace to see what was going on there. I started off, panicking somehow but resolved. I went across the courtyard, forcing myself through groups of people, then through an open arch door that led into a passage which opened out into another row of houses. There were mostly women and children in this part of the palace, and some men who had just finished eating and were washing their hands outside or were talking to the women in the corner of the houses. I found another door that led into another passage onto yet another row of houses. I followed two masked figures that talked in their characteristic manner and tracing their path towards another passage. I could guess that the corpse of the late chief had been taken towards that direction from *Lefem*. Out of the passage, in a small yard in front of an antic building made from rudimentary material, bamboo walls and a grass thatch roof there were several masked figures that stood there guarding the entrance into the house.

“Stop at that point,” said one of them, quickly covering his face with a mask and swinging the ancient staff as if to split my head with it.

“Is it your snake leading you to this place or is it your real self?” asked another in a deep quavering voice. I stood dumbfounded. My feet trembled on the earth. A thought came to me to quickly retreat and avoid getting into trouble with the masks. Yet I hesitated. It was as if I had been lured by some spiritual force to the place for some unclear mission. This was a forbidden zone completely cut off from the world of people up at the courtyard. They called me by name. Voice after voice spoke expressing surprise that I was able to get there so freely. The noise attracted two people from inside the house. They stood on a small mud-raised veranda and looked towards my direction with surprise.

“What are you doing here?” asked one of them. I knew the two of them. One was Nyontsembeng, Atemangwat’s messenger. And the other was one of the kingmakers who had spoken so wisely the day I went to Anya palace.

“My fathers, if you permit me, I will like to learn from you,” I said.

“Let him come and trace his shadow in the darkness,” said Nyontsembeng.

“Allow him to pursue his desire,” said the kingmaker. “He is no small man in this land. If he wants to know what is happening here let him come in. Who are those to carry the staff tomorrow? Do you know what transpired between the leopard and the cat?” said an old man. They stood in a little group and concerted for a few minutes before inviting me to a hut adjacent the main house. It was a large hut with the roof woven with fine *kappela* grass, a kind of long weed with tiny stems and soft spear-like leaves that were woven round the sticks and bamboos until a giant roof that looked like a cone with a pointed top was formed above. The walls of the house were made from *afina* stems held at different ranges with long dry raffia bamboos. The oval entrance was hemmed by wood on which were several carvings and except one was very short he could not get in without stooping. I followed the old man into the hut and he asked me to sit on bare floor. I immediately obeyed the instructions and joined two other persons who squatted on the floor.

“Dokta,” said the old man. “The parrot does not say everything it sees. This is sacred ground. Whatever you see and hear in this place you will leave here with sealed lips. Whatever we do in this place you will do same. You have gone to school and we are happy that you have come home to meet us. You have not only come to greet your mother but the whole country. We thank you for that. The broken homestead of Mbe Tanju-Ngong will stand and we know you will make it stand,” said the old man.

A herbalist came in and brought out a concoction of roots and herbs in a calabash and gave it to me to drink. I gobbled the bitter stuff down my throat and almost immediately it was like my whole being was expanding and claws were stretching out at the tips of my fingers. Then he sprinkled some white powder on my left palm and asked me to lick it. As I licked it some of the dusty stuff entered my nostrils and I sneezed like someone who kept bees in his nostrils. At first I felt dazed and then my eyes brightened and I thought I had multiple visions, with shadows moving about in the little room where I was seated. I was deserted for a while before someone was sent to fetch me. He gave me a fresh leaf to put between my lips and to hold it in that position until I left the hall. He led me into the main hall of the bamboo house. I moved with uneven steps seeing people that looked like the spirits of the underworld, of people who were dead a long time ago. They were going about their own businesses unperturbed. Some had fractured teeth and other wore crowns of ancient tradition made essentially of tree barks and leopard skins.

It was a dark hall and I could see mostly silhouettes of people. But the person who came out distinctly was the diviner, Mbe Begeoh, who was decorating the corpse which stretched out on a low platform covered with royal cloth at the center of the hall. A red cap was worn on his head. Mbe Begeoh was a renowned diviner and herbalist and knew the barks of trees like a lover would know the body of his mistress. He was famous for preparing concoctions that could invoke spirits from the underworld. Inside the hall, there was a strong smell of herbs, a concoction of leaves and barks of special trees. The smell of the concoction filled my nose and I could feel my senses vivifying. It was like I was having a series of visions with images fleeting through my eyes.

“Fuo Beyano,” said Mbe Begeoh, “you are going on a journey. You are traveling to meet our ancestors in the underworld. We anoint you with this *belang* to give you powers to travel to the world in the image of the one you have given us

as your successor,” he said sprinkling the concoction over the royal cloth in which the corpse was wrapped. “Your successor will continue your reign with the same courage, authority and wisdom you showed over the people of Beyano and in all of Lewoh country.” He put the rest of the concoction in a little calabash and handed it to one of the kingmakers. “Keep this in a safe place. I will use it for the initiation of the successor immediately he is caught and brought in here,” said the diviner. Then he ordered that the corpse be taken to the *Lefem*. A kingmaker went out and came with some of the masked figures, *betroh*, who carried the chief through a backdoor which opened out into the thick sacred grove. Led by the diviner, they trudged on into an open space in the grove. It was quiet out there save for the distant hum of voices from the palace, the chirping of birds and the rustle of lizards as they raced on dried leaves on the ground. The corpse was laid on a wooden platform near a freshly dug grave. I could see three mounds covered with grass and I suspected that these were graves of the chief’s ancestors.

The diviner prepared another concoction of leaves which he called *ndwat*. At the moment, some chiefs and *Bekem-allah* had assembled. The diviner sprinkled the *ndwat* and *fuefu* inside the grave and the corpse was lowered into it. The diviner sprinkled the concoctions on the corpse saying:

“Fuo Beyano, you are traveling to the ancestral world. We wish you peace in the next world. Intercede for women and children, for your subjects in Beyano village and for the people of Lewoh. When you go, do not forget to send us many children and swell our barns with good harvests to feed the world,” he sprinkled the concoction on the corpse. Then he called Nkemaſid to come closer to the grave. The diviner asked him to sprinkle the *ndwat* in the grave. He did as he was told and repeatedly swearing the *ajoh*.

“Fuo Beyano,” Nkemaſid said, “the leopard on the banks of Lebiale Falls. You ruled over us and your reign was good. We are here to send you to the underworld to rest with our

ancestors pending your return. The gods of your forefathers will lead you, tread gently till you reach your new destination. Before your departure, you gave me your word. I heard you and I shall do just what your lips instructed. If I swallowed your words or changed them, within seven days send a plague of the most terrible kind, the kind of plague that razed a clan and people died in agony and pain Within seven days send the plague to destroy me and my entire household,” he said, sprinkled the *ndwat* in the grave. When he concluded, some persons were asked to cover the body with earth. The rest of us washed our hands with special leaves that produced foams and then rinsed them in water. While this was happening, the masquerades, the *trohs*, had now moved to the graveside beating drums and shaking giggling instruments, producing a variety of weird noises from the sacred grove.

Twenty-Eight

I returned to the palace courtyard and found that the population was still swelling. It filled up every nook of the palace and people almost had to squeeze their way through. I could feel the heavy breath of the air of expectation of the solemn moment, but no one was saying a word about it yet. There were preparations, endless preparations and movements. Men moved across the courtyard carrying crates of beer and jugs of palm wine or raffia wine and the women carrying baskets and food flasks, disappeared into the palace. Others sat or stood idly or conversed in little groups and the atmosphere was filled with steady hum until it was subdued by the distant mysterious and awful noises in the innermost part of the sacred grove where the most terrifying sacred society of the *Lefem* was performing its rituals. The drumming and the jiggling, jangling noises sustained by a regular rhythm occasionally stopped, followed by weird supernatural voices which ushered in a calm and repressive atmosphere.

The drumming and the noises started again with an intensified and stupendous rhythm: jig, jag, jag-jag jug; jig, jag, jag-jag jug...., interspersed with the rhythm of the sharp sound of the metal gong. Then there were loud voices singing from a different direction, and the singers were coming closer and closer. There was commotion in the courtyard as people hurried in and out of the palace. The voices were quite distinct now. They were singing and dancing *nkeh-mabe*, superseding the noise in the sacred grove which could now be heard only in the background. I stretched my eyes towards the direction of the noise. A large group of people in a festive procession and colorful regalia emerged, singing, dancing and moving towards the palace. A large parasol swung round and round above the internal core of the procession. In front were multitudes of people in sheer expression of nobility, brandishing dance

machetes in the air, dancing forward in hops, clanging their machetes in midair and dancing backwards with exotic display and agility. Some carried guns. And as they moved closer to the palace courtyard they fired several gunshots in the air cutting branches of trees whose leaves fell on the ceremonial ground. The kites and crows circled in the far horizon and volumes of smoke filled the sky. And there were explosions after explosions as the men continued to fire the guns in swift succession. People craned their necks to see the figure under the parasol, to catch a glimpse of the figure that was well guarded and surrounded with dignity.

It was Atemangwat! Nyatemeh! Achiabuieh! Nyangwi! It was the royal prince of the land! The only one who killed and the only one who slaughtered; the one who spoke a common language with the gods of the land; the one who travelled to the underworld, held the day by the ear and pulled it behind, the only one who slept on the leopard's skin. It was his coming that set the world of Lewoh in motion that set the core of the *Lefem* in the sacred grove in mystical bewilderment. Only his lean face could be seen as the people made their descent into the courtyard. His entourage was made up of chiefs, *bekem-allah*, Mafuas, Ankwetta, kingmakers and palace attendants, several women including those who had the ranks of chiefs, his wives and some princes and princesses, surrounded him. One of them carried a huge U-shaped metal gong and strutted ahead of the entourage, playing it. As he came closer, the soul-searching sound of the gong could be heard.

The women folk split the air with ululations at the first sight of the Prince, screaming like the sirens in the ponds at the foot of Lebialem falls during a stormy rainfall. And yet the singers raised their voices:

Hoyo! Ho!

Hoyo! Ho!

Nyatemeh

Ho!

Man beyond Man

Ho!

Lion of Kubuku

Warrior of Schwart

King of Mbrohngwi

Ho!

Tread on the earth

And let it be anointed

Hoyo! Ho!

Hoyo! Ho!

It was as if the gods of the land were being summoned to witness the solemn ceremony. Atemangwat was ushered to his royal platform on the part of the courtyard that bordered the sacred grove. It was a shack decorated in the interior with royal cloth. Chieftain objects and other objects of antiquity were displayed on the ground before the stand. He sat on a carved stool with an elaborate back rest and placed his legs on an ornate leopard's skin that spread before him. As soon as Atemangwat was settled, different groups of people – the chiefs, *bekem-allah* and families went and greeted, stooping and clapping and giving room to other groups that had formed an interminable chain for greetings, loyalties and honors.

When all was settled some kingmakers went to Atemangwat, stooped and whispered in his ears. He rose immediately inviting his Mafuo and Ankwetta and they went through the broad arch passage into the inner part of the palace. As soon as they left some *betrob* masquerades moved up and down the courtyard. They were followed by a more frightful *trob* masquerade dressed in antique style. It paced its way slowly about the courtyard, sending frightened women, children and men pressing upon the crowd to escape its wrath. This was the *trob-ndii*, the most dreadful of the masquerades that fetched out people with charms and witchcraft and destroyed them accordingly. It was said anyone who attended the funeral with evil intensions, especially when the return of

the chief was being awaited could get into trouble there. It was whispered that in another village not long ago, a wizard had collapsed in the presence of the *troh-ndii* during a funeral. He confessed his evil intentions before he was cured. Since the succession did not favor his daughter's household he had come with the intention of causing the rightful successor to be blind and insane.

It was not long before Atemangwat returned. And as soon as he did, the wooden drum in the little hut was played with recurrent long pauses. It was sending a message that I could not understand. I looked round for someone who could explain to me but everyone around was busy in one way or the other. I turned towards the door to the arch passage where the widows of the late chief were filing in, in a procession led by his *Ngwinkongo*, all shaved to the root of the hair. *Ngwinkongo* carried a big wooden bowl on her head and held a cocoyam plant in her right hand, moving mournfully round the courtyard ahead of a long line of women and their children. Someone near me said the departed chief had thirteen wives, fifty children and twenty grandchildren. The other women carried cocoyam plants too and dishes in which they used to serve their husband food. Other mourners joined the women and the children in the sorrowful train round the courtyard. At a particular point one of the *troh* halted them. Then about a hundred *betroh* filed in led by an elder who was not wearing a mask, stamping the ground with antique staffs they carried, occasionally making some mysterious noises. A man brought in a sheep and held it by a cord in the center where the mourners stood. The elder, in the company of the *troh-ndii*, went to Atemangwat, held his fists under his chin and, stooping, spoke to the prince.

"Nyatemeh, the world is waiting," he said then stepped backwards. Atemangwat rose from his seat accompanied by his entourage and moved to the center where the thick crowd of mourners had gathered leaving some space in the middle. He was handed a cock which he held in his right hand and flapped

it in the face of the *trob-ndii*. In a circular pattern, *betrob* hopped to the other side of the courtyard. He went round again and flapped the cock in the face of *trob-ndii* and the circular pattern was repeated over and over and each time one could hear the frightful jingling noises carried by the *trob-ndii* inside his *ndep*. The sheep bleated and the world of Beyano broke loose with mourning. The bleating of the sheep announced the chief's disappearance. The wives and the children wept for their departed husband and father. A man brought a calabash with a *nkeng* branch and handed the *nkeng* to Atemangwat. Atemangwat dipped the branches in a calabash and sprinkled the liquid towards the women and their children and *betrob*. It was the *ndwat*, the peace ritual which was performed to counter any evil force that might want to disrupt the event. The *betrob* fretted and strutted here and there. *Trob-ndii* moved majestically towards the children and danced away again.

There was anxiety in the air. Atemangwat went toward the children, followed by the rest of the *betrob* and laid his hand on one of the late chief's children. I saw a young man ripped off his feet by the *betrob*. He tried to resist, crying at the top of his voice but it was too late. The *betrob* disappeared with him into the inner part of the palace. That was the new chief. The crowd cried with joy. The people looked anxiously to see who the rest of the cabinet members were. Atemangwat was then ushered to his stool. The *betrob* went on snatching more young men and women from the chief's children, those who were to form the new cabinet.

The new cabinet was clad in royal robes and led by the kingmakers to a special shack that had been elaborately decorated with royal cloth, metal gongs, statues and other scary-looking ancient artefacts, except the leopard's skin and other royal objects that were the preserve of Atemangwat, the paramount ruler. And when the new cabinet filed into the courtyard, there was a sigh of relief. The chief of Beyano who had disappeared had now returned. Shortly afterwards, the whole cabinet rose, led by the new chief to pay his allegiance to

Nyatemeh, to Atemangwat, the paramount ruler of the land. The new chief stooped in front of Atemangwat until his face was perpendicular to the earth. Atemangwat placed his sword on his back and muttered a few words. Beyano people went mad with joy as the new chief and his cabinet returned to their shack. They danced in the courtyard and clanged their machetes singing heroic songs and praises to their new chief. The men danced in heroic patterns and went to their new chief, bowed and greeted. The women took their turns, singing songs of praises and dancing, they went and greeted their husband who had returned, offering colanuts in a calabash. The children took their turn. They danced and went to greet their father. They carried with them drinks of all sorts – a jug of raffia wine, palm wine, a crate of beer, gin and whiskey which they placed on the floor in front of the table, singing songs of praise thanking the gods of the land for the return of their father.

At this point Atemangwat's entourage rose and left in the same grand style that he arrived. After he had left, one of the late chief's children who had refused to go with the rest of the children to greet their new father went around talking and insulting in a loud voice. It was as if he was possessed. He hit the drum with his fist with such violence, as if to say if the hand could not smash the drum the drum could smash the fist. People looked at him with consternation. He seemed drunk, but something from the very depth of his soul was revolting against his own person. He took brisk steps talking alone and swearing. I saw him lift his head and then his finger to the sky, the muscle of his neck tensed out. Then he took quick fast steps towards the other end of the courtyard, caught a man who was about to slip into the crowd and gripped him on the neck. I strained to see who that was. Before I could determine the figure myself, people were already shouting. "Nkemafid. Nkemafid." I heard some faint words from the late chief's son suggesting that Nkemafid had duped him, drained him of his money and done something else, while Nkemafid was

desperately struggling to free himself from the grip. Some elders assisted by some young men separated them. But he was still talking and cursing until the *troh* intervened and whisked him off into the inner part of the palace and he was never seen again for the rest of the evening even when the *mpeh* was danced.

Before the *mpeh*, the all night dancing, eating and drinking started many people whose homes were near went to bring their dancing outfit. It was as if I should never leave the scene. The rhythmic beating of drums, the heroic chants accompanied by dancing and merry-making was supposed to last all night. There was also match-making, those who joked that they were going to bring back the chief who had disappeared in another way. And at times they went into real action, sneaking into the bushes on the threshold of the palace with their partners. There was big flurry business, brisk business under the cover of darkness. The faint electric lights could only show parts of the palace but people found their way out with torches and lights from their mobile phones. The real amorous ones needed no lights. Lust showed its beams on their paths and dissolved all fears and obstacles. I heard someone cautioning another who was possibly disappearing in the darkness with another's wife.

"Do not do the thing Nkembeteh did during Makamanda's funeral," he said. Just immediately several voices spoke intermittently from different directions.

"Who wants to break his kinsman's heart?"

"Let his thief spare the child if she is carrying one."

"They should not pull down all of Fuo Beyano's coffee stems this night. His successor needs something to begin life with," said someone near me. The people spoke amidst sneers, scorn and laughter. I wanted to know what Nkembeteh had done during Makamanda's funeral. Nkembeteh seemed to be a hero in nocturnal activities during funerals. The scandal he had caused with Nkembepfok over Fuo Beyano's young wife a couple of days before had not been totally resolved. And

reference was still made to him again about his exploits during another funeral. I asked the man who had just spoken near me what Nkembeteh did during Makamanda's funeral.

"Anyitem, daughter of Asabateh, attended Makamanda's funeral with her three-year old daughter. Her husband, Mbe Nwet, was very ill and did not go with them. His wife and child spent the night celebrating the departure of the dead man. Even a dumb child never hides the truth. When Anyitem returned with her daughter on the evening of the following day after the death celebration, the daughter narrated her experiences to her father: 'Papa, I ate many, many things. My mother gave me much meat. Many people gave me meat and drinks. There were so many people there. So many people that in the night there was no place to sleep. Until a certain man was sleeping on top of mama in the bush. I was playing in the grass near them.'" I raised my eyes in the dim lights to see the man's face, shrugged my shoulders with a jerk as if there was a sharp pain in me. "The story did not end there," continued the man. "On the Lewoh market day two weeks after, Mbe Nwet's daughter ran up to him and pulled him on the finger and showed him the man. You can now tell who the man was," he concluded.

Darkness completely shrouded the palace and its environs, except the flashes of light here and there provided by a generator and those with powerful searchlights. And although I felt tired, the urge to continue to be part of the frenzied atmosphere still held me very firm in Beyano palace. Bombabili met me standing under one of the electric bulbs.

"Where was you? I have went to and fro looking for you," he said.

"I was in the crowd," I said.

"Wanda sha neva end. I look for you until I thought that you have gallivanted to Anya," he said. "Let us begin to parambulate. The last program of the item tomorrow is very long," he said and gave me the details of the next day's events as it had been announced while we were in the sacred grove.

The celebration of the departure and return of Fuo Beyano was to start the following day after a requiem mass. The mass was to take place in the parish church. I had further hints that the main ritual was to be performed by the immediate family members before the dancing started. They were to offer sacrifices to their ancestors so that when the crowds came later they would have to share in the sacrificial rites by dancing, eating and drinking. We had to leave early since the main celebration was the following day. I didn't want to miss anything. We started the journey to Anya late in the night trudging across boulders, climbing and descending and climbing again till we reached our destinations.

Twenty-Nine

Bombabili came into the parlor when I was dressing up to go church. He waited until I was ready and as we moved along he told me it had been a long time since he went to church. He said he always went there when there was a big occasion bringing many people from outside Lewoh country.

“Why don’t you go to church regularly?” I asked.

“My grandfather told me that only a man who have many wives know how to talk to God and can tell another people correct way to God. Can a man without a wives talk to ancestor? Do he know problem of family? That why I don go to church because the man standing in fron there don have wives, don have children. So how does he knows God?” he asked.

“God’s ways cannot be questioned,” I said.

“I am not question God ways. This is simple matamatic I have calculate to and fro....

We entered the church shortly before the procession to the altar started. An enchanting song in Nweh was intoned and the whole congregation rose with the solemn rhythm. The priest, dressed in an old cream-white chasuble with purple linings and a gold ring shining on the fourth finger of his left hand, accompanied by the altar boys arrived at the altar and made a profound bow. In the next bow he kissed the altar, followed by the incensing of the cross and the altar.

I sat glued to my seat in the open church. It was so full that if an angel dropped from heaven he would not find space to stand and deliver a message. Even when the mass started, people continued to trickle in until a small crowd of people who had no seats stood in the rear of the church. It was often the case when it concerned the death of a prominent man in the clan. Relatives and friends who lived out of the village came

in their numbers to accompany the villagers bury their kin. I saw some people whom I had not met for ages. Death brought to life those that one would have thought had given up life a long time ago. In Nweh tradition the worst crime you can commit even to your enemy is not to attend his or her funeral. And so funeral ceremonies brought home relations who were long considered missing or brought complete families together that had been scattered for long or provided an opportunity to settle long-standing family disputes and to reconcile with one another.

Chiefs from other villages were present in the requiem mass. They were given special places in the front row of the church. But the new chief was absent. There were some people related to Beyano Palace that were present and the most prominent was the fellow who had created an issue with Nkemafid in the evening of the previous day. He moved up and down whispering to one person and the other. Some of the children of the bereaved chief still tied folded cloth round their waists as a sign of bereavement, some had barbed their hair to the scalp.

My mind wagged with thoughts and issues. I tried to redirect towards the order of the mass but it was ever restless, searching, reliving experiences, quarrelling with the self. Then I woke up from the reverie during the singing of the “Kyrie”. It was sung in Latin. It produced such beautiful melody that even those who had never been to church could easily pick up the rhythm. The thick varied volume of the celestial voices filled the vast vacuum of the new church building, sealed above by a gigantic roof. The roof itself was devoid of a ceiling. The walls were spanned out massively with vast openings right up to their sojourning lapses. The new church building had been built to accommodate the ever-increasing number of Christians and it was also given a modern architectural touch. The communicants, their voices, the church ministers and the church building and the heavens were then bound by the unison of voices that echoed the priest’s distant call of the

“kyrie, eleison”. The “kyrie” was so soul-penetrating and took so much time that the priest decided to recite the Gloria. His voice resonated with the soul of the church building.

Two readings concluded, one from the book of Wisdom and the other from the book of Lamentations, a song was intoned and the congregation rose. A procession led by a woman carrying a small basket on her head in which was the Holy Bible wrapped in royal cloth placed between two burning candles, moved through the nave of the church. The men and women were dressed in a special way – they passed the royal cloth between their thighs leaving a big volume of the cloth to descend to the level of the knee and then tied the edges at the waist. The men wore white shirts and the women wore white blouses. Both men and women carried *nkeng* branches with which they moved solemnly to the altar. When the bible was unfolded and placed on an analogion vested in white, the bearers of *nkeng* branches formed an arc with the branches above the bible and the priest until that part of the altar looked like the shrine of Alentenduri.

The homily was a little too long. The priest started by asking the question: Who is a true Christian? He went on to say many things about who a true Christian was, relating it to the experience of the chief of Beyano.

“An example of a true Christian,” he said, “was late Thompson Tazi-Nyang who, though a village chief, was not involved with heathen cults but one who had accepted Christ as his savior. Christianity was the religion that purified the soul and brought it closer to God, provided room for the understanding of God’s mission on earth and for which he sent his son Jesus Christ to spread the gospel of faith. The mission of the Catholic Church the world over and which had its roots in Rome was to fulfil this mission.” The mass, the priest said, was a special requiem mass offered for late Thompson Tazi-Nyang, (the late chieftain) who had passed away into the hands of the Lord. In spite of all else he had offered himself to the church. At this point the church did not discriminate between

polygamous and monogamous families who were willing to take the sacrament of God. Individuals were now free to go to church and receive the sacrament of God without bias for certain cultural constraints like polygamy. And the sermon went on with the explanation of the meaning of life and death, of holy death and sinful death, of Christian burial and heathen burial. The priest debunked tradition and certain traditional practices that refused to see the light. Christ was the light, the beginning and the end, the only way and the only destination, the dream and the ultimate realization, the word and the Truth....

I was caught in a probing reflection, being pushed by some unknown voices and instincts to ancestor worship in the last few days, participating in heathen cults and sacrifices. Yet I was in church that morning listening to the priest, filling my soul with the teachings of Christ. I knew one fact and believed fervently in it – that God, the Creator of life, exists. The form in which He exists I could not say. And when I pondered over my own existence, I wondered whether the consciousness I had was a similar experience with other people. That as an individual, I see and think and do things which assure me of an existence. And that I also exist because I can feel and experience painful feelings which usually make me more conscious of existence. And when the pain is exceeding, you go down on your knees and pray to God for mercy, for salvation. What if I closed my eyes and died, would the world not cease to exist for me? Is the world not determined by individual perception or consciousness of it? And once that consciousness was lost could one still claim an existence? Does one find confirmation of existence only in the company of others? Were they the best example? I had seen people in churches struggling to show faith, struggling against their own humanity plagued with words and actions that were not in conformity with church laws. It was everyone's conscience troubling him or her; I watched them receive Holy Communion and file past me to their seats hands brought

together in front of their chests, their heads slightly bowed. I watched their faces express sloth, anger, treachery, lust, avarice, struggling to suppress the human follies in them. What would life look like if one were alone in the whole universe? Which cult would one have believed in? What would have happened if Lewoh tradition were the universal tradition of worship as that of the Hebrews? Why was Jesus Christ not born in Lewoh? But that was not the point. The point is that God exists through the inexplicable paradoxes of creation and the individual perceives these through his or her consciousness. If it happens therefore that I cannot see, or think, or feel and all other senses in me were dead it would mean that I have ceased to be alive. And what happens to life after life? I was guilty of the worship of ancestral cults, what the priest condemned. But I could now see that I was distanced by the worship of foreign traditions which drew me away from the reality of my life within a cultural set up.

My head sagged and I raised it immediately. It was as if a thousand needles were piercing my eyeballs or as if little grains of sand were thrown into them. My eyelids weighed heavily down and my head sagged again and again. Was this how helpless and useless a man's body was when the soul abandoned it? Several other persons' heads were sagging against the background of the insistent voice of the priest. A worshipper's trunk rooted out of its seat and he was about to land on the ground when a neighbor seized his arm and repositioned him on the bench. The fellow sat back, rushed both palms through his face then brought the palms together in front of him in serious prayer and contemplation. But he was soon sagging to his right again and several times he sat back with a start. He tilted again until he was leaning on his neighbor's shoulder. The neighbor who had rescued him the first time tapped him on the arm and made him to sit back again.

The homily ended and was followed by the profession of faith. I believe in One God, the Father almighty..... I believe in

one son, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God.... My mind now went back to the ancestral shrines and rituals I had actively participated in the day before and the ancestral shrine my father had built and to which my mother urged me to go and announce my presence to my dead father and other ancestors. I tried to divert my mind back to the Apostles' Creed, reciting along with other congregants, omitting lines and getting confused. I stopped reciting and listened to the choral voices of the rest of the congregation recite it to the end. I was soulless, unable to come out of what now became the source of a permanent conflict in my soul.

A short prayer of the liturgy heralded the offertory procession. I felt the sonorous rhythm of the tambours and metal gong in the core of my mind as it sent echoes of beatitude to heaven or the underworld. The village choir was at its best. The conductress, a lively and assertive lady swayed in rhythmic proportions, waved her hand stiffly as if she was giving firm instructions on how to follow the path towards beatitude. The men and women sang, mostly in Nweh, and the sounds of local tambours, rattles and the sonorous echo of the metal gong harmonized naturally with the songs. When the song ended, *eseih* was intoned and the drummers picked up the rhythm. It was the offertory song which caused the heavens and the underworld to reverberate with the ancient melody as the singers stimulated the atmosphere with raptured ancestral voices. It was as if the ancestors were sitting among us and nodding their heads. The offertory procession was led by a small group of communicants who carried a special gift wrapped in an embroidered blue napkin. They were dressed in traditional outfit and danced to the vibrant rhythm of *eseih*, singing and waving *nkeng* leaves in and out, shoving their bodies forward, stopping and shaking their bosoms in style and precision. And they danced in that repetitive pattern until they reached the altar. In that ecstatic moment, the other communicants followed them dancing and singing in two columns, carrying personal precious gifts of sacrifices including

fruits, eggs, plantains, cocoyams, envelops, bank notes and coins to offer to the Maker. The priest stood, flanked by the altar servers, waiting to receive the special gifts. The priests collected the gifts and handed them to the altar boys while the Christians continued dancing and singing *eseih* back to the rear of the church, cheering God's love for the cheerful giver:

We come with our gifts to offer

Ya oh!

And to give praises to ndem-allah

Ya oh!

Fuo Beyano, you speak with God

Ya oh!

Let him be blessed in the mighty name of God

Ya oh!

Let Fuo Ndem bless him in the name of our ancestors

Ya oh!

After the special gifts, several other offerings were made: there was what was announced as the normal Sunday offerings, followed by the Reverend Father's bread basket, and the basket for future memorial services of the departed chief. The men, women and children streamed in on three flanks to drop their offerings in the baskets held by the altar boys, while the priest placed the corporal, the purificator, the chalice and the pall and the missal on the altar.

"Pray brethren, that my sacrifice and yours be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father," the priest said then extended his hands over the offerings. After saying the prayer, he went on to say the Eucharistic prayer: "Remember your servant, Thompson Tazi-Nyang, whom you have called today from this world to yourself. Grant that he who was united with your son in death like him, may also be one with him in his resurrection...."

Before the communion rite started, a church warden announced that only those who had prepared themselves

according to Catholic faith were qualified to receive communion. I could see people sit up from their slumbering positions and peer at the priest. It was getting late for the funeral celebrations and the mass service was not ending so soon. When he took the paten, rendered a prayer which ended with “blessed are those who are called to his supper” and moved to the edge of the raised platform where the altar stood, I could hear the hustle of the feet of the communicants who hurried to him as if they had been told that the bread was not enough for everyone. The faithful received communion, some in both hands while others pulled out their tongues, closed their eyes and waited for the priest to drop the slim light bread on their hungry and wary tongues, a happy ending to the requiem mass.

It was about midday. Bombabili and I left the church and went down the flight of stairs to the open field in front of the building, crossed the field towards the road.

“Wanda sha neva end,” said Bombabili.

“What wonders?” I asked.

“When is time to offertory you pipu call everybody many, many times to bring money. When is time to eat communion you people put condition. Wanda sha neva end,” he said.

“What condition, Bomba?” I said.

“You pipu knows better. Is there somebody who does not have teet? So, you pipu cannot give food to those pipu who you don know? Everybody is hungry. Everybody is sopos to eat food because everybody eat. Whether is your friend or is not your friend or vice versa, everybody eat. Everybody have teet. Everybody come from faraway, hungry. You pipu only give food only to pipu you pipu knows. Wanda sha neva end,” he said.

I gave up the discussion and concentrated my gaze over the hill across the Bechafem River where a stream of people was moving on the winding road on the body of the hill in colorful regalia. It was as if the world was moving towards one destination – towards Beyano village passing through Anya. All

those who had attended the requiem mass moved towards the same direction. The men, the women and children who had put their belongings like cooked food, dance equipment and other possessions in neighboring houses and attended the requiem mass quickly rushed for them and joined the multitude of people moving towards Beyano Village.

The sky was open and the sun flushed its meadow on the scintillating carpets of soft grass and scanty thickets on the flanks of the road. Sometimes the rich foliage gleaming under the afternoon sun reflected the colorful dresses of the people who passed through. It was a weary road and I found pleasure moving with Bombabili who never stopped talking about the son of the departed chief who had wanted to ruin his father's funeral. Bombabili stopped to fetch his dance regalia. I waited for him and when he returned, we pursued the road, bypassing people.

Right from afar, I could hear the sound of the wooden drum. Someone was playing on it furtively.

"They wul begin very soon," said Bombabili doubling his steps. I followed him at times gasping while on the contrary he was talking loud and going on. I did not want to miss the slightest action of the event. As we moved faster, overtaking the queues of people, I was worried that the ritual that was to take place immediately before the dancing and eating. I was told by a close relation of the family that it usually involved only the immediate family but it did not restrict visitors. We hurried past the stream of people coming from different directions. The drums sounded again and again. My heart throbbed with its rhythm summoning a craving to reach Beyano palace as soon as possible.

Thirty

Beyano palace courtyard was busy. People moved in and out making final preparations. Behind the courtyard, where there were a cluster of houses, every nook was filled with people carrying food and drinks from one house to the other. People who did not have the opportunity to secure one of the houses in the palace to host their dance groups built their tents in the coffee farms on the outskirts of the palace or went a little further to neighboring compounds. Some special guests were being entertained by relations and friends, especially those who had come from far away or those who had brought food and drinks to assist friends and relations during the celebrations.

I passed through the arch door, towards the inner part of the palace and within a short time I had reached a destination I had not planned. It was where the corpse of the late chief was dressed and adorned before his journey into the underworld. I met a long procession which was composed mainly of family members. Many of them had barbed their hair to the scalp and many still had royal cloth tied round their waists. The first wife held a calabash from which she occasionally took salt and sprinkled on their path as they sang and went behind the diviner, passing through the very door we used when the deceased chief was being taken to the sacred grove.

With the permission of an elder in the family, I followed them at the tail of the procession, passing through intricate paths.

“Ya!” said the elder. “We could never do this sacrifice without a stranger coming in. This means that we are moving along the paths of our ancestors,” he said, held my hand and led me towards the ancestral shrine behind a long queue of family members. It was a procession led by Mbe Begeoh, the diviner and followed by the newly enthroned chief including

the members of his cabinet – Asaah, Nkwetta, Mafuo, and Ankwetta. The family followed, singing *eseib* and sprinkling salt and palm oil and melon seeds on our path. Some held *nkeng* branches which they brandished above their heads as they sang and danced to the sacred grove:

One's welfare is with the gods

O oob ob

Our joy lies in the ritual

O ob ob

We are calling for Tanju and Asongatabong

O ob ob

We are begging Taleke who started the root

O ob ob

We are coming to greet you

O ob ob

We are singing to Ndem-allab, to Fuondem

O ob ob

We are coming with our husband and father

O ob ob

To greet and glorify you

O ob ob

Hold the nkeng leaves in both hands and wave in the sky

O ob ob

Fathers and mothers lying in the earth

O ob ob

Soften the soil for us, let our crops grow, let our barns swell

O ob ob

Soften our women's womb, let them bear heroes and warriors

O ob ob

Enshrine our husband and father with wisdom

O ob ob.

The singing could not subdue the heavy hum of voices in the palace and the trees provided a shed whose breathe had the balm of the spirits of Nyi-mbong. We arrived at the ancestral

shrine located in the heart of the sacred grove and when the diviner stopped the rest of us gathered around him. He ordered the singing to stop, pushed aside the bamboo door of the shrine and invited the new chief and his cabinet in. Some of the women went in with them. Not many people could enter the shrine but I found a way of peeping in. There were intermittent lapses as the diviner poured his incantations. He anointed the “heads” of the gods with *mbebieu* leaves saying:

“Gods of our ancestors, we the descendants of Fuo Beyano have come to greet you and to present our new chief and his retinue. Our chief left us and we are happy that he has returned. We have come to show him and the ruling house to you and to ask for your blessings on their heads. We ask you to guide the new chief. Give him wisdom and the courage to rule, give him many wives and many children who will continue to spread your seed in the world. Soften his mind with humility for as our forefathers said; if you have never eaten soil then you will never know how the soil tastes in poor people’s mouths. Fathers and mothers, commend us to the gods of the household of Fuo Beyano, to Ndemallah and Fuondem the most terrific, the most powerful. Raise your heads from the earth and deliver us from those who have evil minds towards us.”

When he finished, a song was intoned and the people sang and danced slowly against the background of the breaking twigs and the hum of voices in the palace. The old diviner collected small pots which were carried by some of the chief’s wives. He placed them on a small space between his legs, opened each of the pots took some stuff out of it and sprinkled around the “heads”. He did same with the contents of the other pots. The smell of cooked goat meat filled the vicinity and I could see the diviner sprinkling the tiny bits of the meat round each “head” saying:

“We have come to offer you sacrifices today; we have called the world to share with us in the sacrifices. You can hear the drumming already and the exciting voices of the people. Lift your heads from the ground and join us in the celebration. We offer these colanuts and palm wine to feed your thirst so that you can feed us and provide us good health and prosperity....”

He gave the new chief a horn of raffia wine, led him to the heads to anoint and talk to the gods of his ancestors and present his cabinet. The new chief anointed the “heads” and talked to the gods of his ancestors as guided by the diviner. At the end of the ritual, a kingmaker led the new chief and his entourage towards the inner part of the palace. As we moved out of the sacred grove, I overheard the diviner and one of the kingmakers discuss how the new chief was going to go through an initiation rite in the sacred shrine after the celebrations. I went closer to them to catch the least bit of that information. The rite was to last for seven weeks and to take several levels. Within that time the kingmakers would make the new chief know his rights and limitations, his duties and obligations as a ruler, as well as the art of public speaking. During this period he would be introduced to the wives and the children of the late chief. He would also be introduced to those wives the kingmakers would expect him to have children with. Apart from the chief’s wives whose hearts were still beating very strongly, arrangements were being made for a young girl to keep the new chief company for the seven weeks in the sacred shrine to deliver a new prince. The young woman or the *ngwinkongo* would have authority over other wives married to the palace. After seven weeks the new chief would make his first public appearance when he would actually be handed the mantle of power. The new chief and entourage retreated to the house behind the palace and ate the rest of the food from which that of the gods had been extracted before joining the crowd outside.

The prince, Atemangwat, the supreme ruler of Lewoh, arrived with his train and was given the usual heroic reception. The new chief of Beyano with his cabinet fully adorned in chieftaincy regalia was already seated in the shack reserved for him before the Atemangwat arrived. Meanwhile dance groups were putting on their costumes, drinking and receiving the last instructions from their lead performers. And when the dancing started with *eseib* which was danced by twin mothers and fathers, I could hear the jingles of bells and beating of drums and occasional singing by some dance groups in different parts of the palace. All was set for the festivities. I found a comfortable place, quickly replacing someone who left his position to answer a call nearby. The twin mothers and fathers sang and danced *eseib* round the courtyard, anointing the earth with palm oil, salt and melon seeds. Their costume was a peculiar one. The significant part of it was the royal cloth which they passed gorgeously between their legs, leaving a big volume of the tissue that bulked down between the knees. They held long staffs of bamboo with *nkeng* leaves fixed at the top and drinking horns in which they collected gifts. They danced, and sang peacefully round the palace courtyard, performing the rite of the appeasement of the earth before the actual celebration started.

Alungachaba was Atemangwat's royal dance which, according to traditional protocol, usually came after the *eseib* in any ceremony that the paramount ruler was to participate. Alungachaba followed *eseib*. It was danced essentially by the royal household including the chiefs and notables. Bekem-alleh danced towards the chiefs, the chiefs rose and danced towards Atemangwat, and Atemangwat rose with his retinue and strutted elegantly towards the courtyard where the dancing was taking place. The crowds cheered, created an opening for him as he strutted and danced with ease, with pomp, spreading his arms and demonstrating a lively gusto that sent the women and men wild with ululations. The domineering sound of big wooden drums travelled to places beyond the hills and the

drummer beat it with sturdy insistence, rising to a crescendo and sending both the dancers and the onlookers wild with excitement. The other drummer flogged the tambours with energetic stupefaction. The sharp sound of the metal gong cut through the air like a razor. The big wooden drum took precedence dictating the rhythm of the dance, speaking directly with both the dancers and the onlookers.

Doom doom dim dim doom doom dim dim

Ya!

Doom doom dim dim doom doom dim dim

Ya!

Doom doom do-doom doom doom dim dim

Ya! Ya! Ya!

The entire populace was caught in a frenzy of the drumming, the chanting and dancing; the ululations, the jingling of bells, the distant and almost drowned voices of the lead singers, the heroic and fraternal clang of the machetes, the swinging of waists, legs reverberating on the earth as men and women shook their trunks vigorously, sweating and beaming with life. After the royal dance, Atemangwat left accompanied by his retinue. Dance upon dance succeeded: Alungachaba, Nkwéh, Angu, Nchebenjong, Akehbabe, Ku'ngang, Mantamamantama, Nkang, Asamba, Abin, Akoh-anjang, all took their turns on the courtyard; the masquerades thronged in and out, feet stomped on the ground till you could hear the foundations of the earth shake. At the moment, Lewoh people were in harmony with their universe.

Caught in the rhythm of that mystic atmosphere I could not resist. My feet stirred on the ground with the exotic rhythms and my heart throbbed faster. I could not tell when I joined the dancers, dancing like a beheaded goat in a village market and drawing the attention of other dancers and onlookers who came to encourage me with gifts mainly of coins and colanuts while others simply danced in front of me,

hugged me and moved away. I was sweating, beaming with life, my hands filled with coins and colanuts, my muscles twisted to the rhythmic verve of the drums....

Groups that finished dancing earlier entertained themselves in their different shacks or houses. The women's dance, Akoh-anjang concluded the dances. The women came unto the arena singing and swinging the horsetails gracefully from side to side, the noise made by the jingles worn on their feet added a special glare to the melody as they sang and formed a cycle round the drummers. They were led by Mafuo'Ka who held a small horn supposedly of a young bull in her left hand and a white horse tail in her right hand which she swung from side to side. She wore a blouse made from the hand-woven royal cloth at the top and another heavy piece of the royal cloth passed between her legs and held on the waist by a string leaving a big volume of the cloth between the legs. The band on the cap on her head was adorned with cowries and at the crest were the big multi-colored feathers of rare birds, assorted necklaces and *musanga* of royal craft spread down from her neck. She danced elegantly, shaking her bosoms in delicate patterns which were greeted with ululations. When the songs changed from one rhythm to the other the variegated sound of the xylophone summoned the dancers, the singers, the masquerades and drummers to a single moment of joy and beatitude. Akoh-anjang ended with another graceful song with which they danced out of the arena, swinging the horse tails in the same manner they had entered the arena:

Ebua leh a jig eb
Ngong tieb leh
Nwo na nganga
Nwo zea le ngang leh

Bieuh ju'a nsong'a leh
Ngong tieb leh
Nwo na nganga

The day was running very fast and I could already see the grey lining on the horizon. Family members, organized groups and relations entertained themselves and their guests in the different houses and makeshift shacks around the palace. Jugs of raffia wine, crates of beer, flasks and dishes of food were brought to the center of the courtyard. Guests and onlookers who did not belong to any particular groups or relations were fed there. Beyano people and their new chief ensured that no one left the palace without eating and drinking. The people ate and drank, beat the drums and sang on their way home.

Thirty-One

That night I had a dream, drinking and dancing with villagers until late in the night. On my way home, I missed my way. The more I tried to trace my way back the farther I went to the unknown. I traveled round and round amidst darkness and miasmic light until I found myself sitting on the banks of Dead Sea. Rockets and mortar shells launched sporadically in a never-ending feud tore the flanks of Holy City. Volleys of dark-grey smoke covered the whole territory. People fled from the crumbling temples, yelling for help amidst the intermittent blasts. I was so frightened and helpless, shouting until I lost my voice. Several shadows appeared before me, one after the other. My father's image was more prominent and the other images were blurred. The images quickly surrounded me and snatched me off my feet and disappeared.

When I woke from sleep I found myself lying in my room in the village. I left the room, crossed the parlor and sat on the veranda behind the house overlooking the thickets on the hills at Atungong poring over the dream. My mother came up from the main compound holding a couple of fresh garden eggs which she offered to me, then found a chair and sat near me.

“Did you say you will be leaving tomorrow,” she asked.

My mind became fluid and I purged out everything about the pressures and tensions of life. The fresh breeze from the valleys blew caressingly on my face and the cool refreshing atmosphere became the balm for my wandering soul.

“Child”, said my mother. “You have been so busy that you have not been able to talk with your father.”

“Very busy,” I said.

“Make sure you talk to him before your departure,” she said, waited for a moment without a word then continued. “Child, I have told you that you cannot hide burning charcoal

in your palm. Tell me the truth: is your brother dead?" she asked.

"Mami, he is alive," I said.

"And you saw him with your own eyes?" she asked.

"I saw him. I was with him for a few days before I left and he asked me to greet all of you," I said.

"Is he ill?" she asked.

"He is not ill but he is not well," I said.

"Child, do not speak in tongues. Tell me the truth now, I say now. Except you want to hurry me to the grave," she said, looking deeply into my face and planting her hands between her thighs. She was so severe that I could no longer conceal the truth. I told her the situation in which I had met my brother, how I had tried unsuccessfully to convince him to return home. My mother closed her eyes, her head dropped slightly, the pulse in the big vein above her left brow beat very fast.

Bombabili entered, talking at the top of his voice.

"Nearly wul have kill a bird. Chief Beyano thronemen was like the thronemen of Atemangwat," he said. My mind roamed from the sixteen pilgrims in New York University to my brother in the Bronx, to the rockets tearing the flanks of Holy City and to the quiet repose of my ancestors. Bombabili, stood, belched and left.

I sat with my mother looking towards the ancestral shrine.

"In this exciting and deeply engaging novel Nkengasong presents the experiences of a questing hero who engages in a mythic struggle within the limits of human consciousness."

Kashim Ibrahim Tala, Emeritus Professor of African Literature, University of Buea, Cameroon

"Nkengasong shows ingenuity in conceiving the narrative point of view, focalized essentially from the text's central consciousness..."

Shadrach Ambanasom, Professor of African Literature, University of Bamenda, Cameroon

When Kendem, a varsity instructor, returns to his native Lewoh countryside where he spent his childhood, he is seeking relief from the complexity of human civilization after attending the Fulbright Institute in the United States. Instead, he is confronted with two seething issues: how to reveal to his sick and troubled mother the situation in which he finds his elder brother, the successor of Mbe Tanju-Ngong's household, who travelled to the United States many years before and had never returned and the dispute over Fuo Beyano's funeral which is tearing the land apart, whether the deceased village chief, should be given a Christian burial or he should, according to the age-old tradition of Lewoh people, go through a ritual to enable him return and continue ruling his people.



NKEMNGONG NKENGASONG is author of several works of fiction including *Across the Mongolo*, *The Widow's Might*, *Achakasara*; a number of plays including *Black Caps and Red Feathers*, *The Call of Blood*, *Ancestral Earth*, *A Madding Generation*, *Njogobi Festival*; a collection of poems titled *Letters to Marion* and the *Coming Generations* and several short stories. He won the 2013 EKO PRIZE FOR LITERATURE. He currently teaches Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Yaounde 1.



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